

## Examining the Myth of the Pioneer Woman

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**Abstract:** *Almost thirty years after Judith Godden looked afresh at the pioneer woman it seems that history, as a discipline, has gone some way towards attending to her call to complicate its treatment of (white) women's early experiences in the Australian colonies. The myth of the Pioneer Woman, however, remains as pervasive as ever and it remains tacked on, though now rather obliquely, to academic studies of early colonial history.<sup>1</sup> This article examines who exactly the Pioneer Woman of myth is, and where and when she emerges in an Australian 'national consciousness'. In this article I focus on the way in which white women were incorporated into the story of the white Australian nation through the myth in the 1930s during the various State commemorations of white colonisation. At a time when the recognition of the racism, exploitation, and violence that characterised early white settlers' relations with Indigenous peoples remains contentious, the myth, I conclude, continues to hold contemporary resonance because, as an 'origins' story, it brings together race and land/country in a way that glosses over a colonial history of settler violence and Indigenous dispossession.*

### The Pioneer Woman of Myth

In the mid 1980s when the Bicentenary Council of Australia announced plans for their 'Celebration of a Nation' the Australasian Women's Pioneer Society decided that as part of the celebrations they would erect a Pioneer Woman statue. Zena Hodgkinson, then President of the Society, described their aim in this as to highlight pioneer women's 'great contribution to the *foundation* of Australia'.<sup>2</sup> In order to find an appropriate design and artist the project was put out to tender. A brief was drawn up to guide artists in their proposals. The brief was not overly detailed but did ask sculptors to incorporate two children within the design. The design of Alex Kolozy, an established sculptor, was accepted. His concept, explained the panel that made the decision, was closest to that envisioned by the Society.

Margaret Carter, reporting the unveiling of the monument in 1988 for *The Australian*, described the scene depicted in the completed statue:

One third larger than life, Kolozsy's statue captures a moment of high drama. It is as though a threatening event has just occurred and the woman has gathered her children to her. The sound of the swish of her skirt hangs in the air as she encompasses the scene before her. This is a moment of truth, of instinctive decision making... The years of challenge and hardship are etched on this woman's face. She is of indefinable age; her hair straggles a little from its bob, her face is weary but full of hope and determination... And there is a concession to a gentler past. At her throat and hips are narrow ruffles of lace... Kolozsy has created a mixture of gentility, resourcefulness and toughness, characteristics of those pioneer women of the past who survived floods, fire, pestilence, childbirth and the often impossible conditions they had to endure [see Figure 1].<sup>3</sup>

Carter's vivid account of the scene suggests the work is extraordinarily evocative, that the statue immediately elicits emotion, and creates for the viewer a whole 'story'. Without making comment on the artistic skill or merit of Kolozsy's statue, I would argue that Carter's thick description is more likely influenced (if unconsciously) by the powerful underlying conception of pioneer women in an Australian popular imagining. This is a conception heavily influenced by Henry Lawson's 'drover's wife'; by Mary Gilmore and her 'Ode to the Pioneer Woman'; by romantic images of settler women such as those of Frederick McCubbin in his triptych *The Pioneer*, and by the persistent, persuasive, and ever-present mythology of the Pioneer Woman within an Australian popular historical consciousness.<sup>4</sup>

The design chosen by the Pioneer Women's Society was not actually the design preferred by the artist. Kolozsy had originally submitted two draft designs to the Society, with his preference clearly marked. The Society chose the design he had marked as his second choice. The design he preferred was in most respects identical to that selected by the Society, but with one significant difference. In Kolozsy's preferred design the Pioneer Woman held her baby closely to her side with one arm just as she does in the finished sculpture. With the other hand, however, she no longer held onto the hand of her son. Instead she firmly gripped a gun. A comment scribbled on this draft design by a Statue Project committee member indicates how they felt about this first proposal: it was clearly 'not appropriate'.<sup>5</sup> They seemed to be asking apprehensively, 'who would the Pioneer Woman need to face with gun in hand?'

Just as Carter's description tells us much about who the memorialised Pioneer Woman is, the rejection of Kolozsy's 'first preference' by the Pioneer Women's Society tells us a great deal about who she is not. At a simple description, the mythic Pioneer Woman is courageous and capable, perhaps a little wearied, but nurturing and always maternal. She is not a woman who carries a gun. Her task is that of 'civilising', the work of the heart and mind. When her struggle manifests itself physically, which it does not often do, it is with nature, not with any person who could be faced with a gun. Certainly the relations between pioneer 'settlers' and local Indigenous peoples are not something attended to or examined within the myth. The process of choosing an appropriate design by the Statue Committee for the Pioneer Woman Monument speaks eloquently of the many meanings invested in the 'myth'. It highlights the ways in which the discourse of the Pioneer Woman represents her as the figure of mother to the Australian nation and, quite explicitly, mother of an Australian (white) race. She is a participant in a colonial history that involves hardship and suffering, but not violence.

## **Critical evaluations of the Pioneer Woman**

The Pioneer Woman of myth is imagined as a good and self-sacrificing woman: the angel in the home gone bush. Judith Godden's 1979 article irreverently implied pioneer women were treated as the 'sacred cows' of Australian history.<sup>6</sup> Only those virtuous were recorded, only their virtues were reported. Godden argued that scholarship had ignored the loneliness and monotony of everyday life in the bush, and failed to recognise those who did not constitute a 'civilising' or 'domestic' effect on the frontier. In this way the histories written of pioneer women privileged middle-class experience and ideologies, buttressed as they were in middle-class mores, values, and behaviours. Godden wrote: 'The only women to count as pioneers are those who led respectable lives as wives and mothers, helping establish bourgeois hegemony'.<sup>7</sup> With their very selective focus the histories previously written often glossed over the tense relations between white women and Indigenous women as negligible or benign. Godden's argument was a critique of historians' representations of early women settlers' experiences in the colony that fell simply to memorialising these experiences, fitting them neatly within the myth.

But Godden's early assessment needs amending, for the loneliness and hardships of the pioneering process were never really absent in popular representations of pioneer women. These were, in fact, integral to the myth. It is pioneering women's apparent ability to overcome these hardships that makes them worth honouring. What, though, constitutes hardship? While redefining the category of 'pioneer' and duly disclosing the hegemonic tendencies of the Pioneer Woman myth, Godden nonetheless failed to investigate further the class aspects of the myth. As she made clear the middle-class virtue of domesticity is the primary virtue celebrated within the Pioneer Woman myth, so that working-class women could be celebrated as pioneers only in so far as they conformed to middle-class ideals. Yet at the

same time, the myth works to *efface* class. The Pioneer Woman of myth is not of a particular class, and her ‘pioneering’ experiences are effectively *declassified*. All experiences of the Pioneer Woman are celebrated indiscriminately as ‘courageous struggle’. This fits nicely within a colonial Australian history that asserts ‘Australia was and is a classless society’. So for example, Annie Baxter Dawbin, wife of a cattle station owner – whose laments in respect to Australian colonial life included the ‘lack of good servants available’ – is honoured equally as pioneer alongside the imagined long-suffering drover’s wife of Lawson’s creation.<sup>8</sup>

The Pioneer Woman of myth is, in fact, the companionate partner to the mythic Pioneer that John Hirst described – and critiqued – in another early article, ‘The Pioneer Legend’.<sup>9</sup> Hirst argued here that the Pioneer Legend – in which pioneers become the heroes of a quintessential ‘Australian story’ – emerged as an alternative nationalist legend to that of the bushman in the 1890s. Though a relatively inclusive legend (in terms of class), it is inherently conservative. It portrays pioneering as fundamentally the struggle of an individual pioneer to subdue, and therefore possess, the landscape, or nature. In this struggle Indigenous peoples are almost invisible; or if they aren’t wholly invisible, their blood certainly is. Perhaps most importantly the mythic pioneer strives not merely for himself, but, as Hirst argued, ‘for us – “That ye might inherit the land”’.<sup>10</sup> In claiming that the pioneers struggled (against nature, not peoples) that we might ‘inherit’ their gains, an obligation is imposed upon later generations of Australians to respect, and hence, not dispute those gains. In this way both the Pioneer Legend and the myth of the Pioneer Woman act as an ‘origins story’. I borrow this term from Pamela Lukin Watson, who has described the form and function of ‘origins story’ thus:

Most, perhaps all, human groups pick and choose from among the myriad events, objects, behaviour and emotions which surround them, and weave what they find useful into a specific

view of the world and their place within it. This origins story legitimises and usually sanctifies the group's existence, and it generally becomes reflected and reiterated in the roles people play in that particular society.<sup>11</sup>

Building upon Hirst's criticism more recent scholarship has argued that the Pioneer Legend acts and has acted to obscure a past and continued dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their land. Ann Curthoys has persuasively argued that Hirst's Pioneer Legend fits into a tradition of victim narratives inherent to the historical mythology of white Australia.<sup>12</sup> She has asserted that one of the reasons that non-Indigenous Australians have had such trouble recognising a racist colonial past is that they do not and will not recognise themselves as 'beneficiaries of the colonial project'.<sup>13</sup> Rather, they like to imagine themselves as an 'underdog' battling against the odds. The Pioneer Legend is one in which the heroes of the legend endure a harsh climate in an unyielding and unforgiving land. It allows a positive historical consciousness that memorialises the sufferings of the early pioneers and remembers white Australians as 'victims struggling heroically against adversity'.<sup>14</sup> Curthoys explained the popularity of the myth, and its continued pervasiveness, as being a result not just of contemporary and continued utility or usefulness, but also as being due to its inclusiveness along lines of class and gender for Anglo-Celtic Australians.

Curthoys' assertion that women were integrated within the pioneer myths may at first seem to disagree with much of the feminist literature on Australian national identity that has argued that women have been specifically excluded from national mythologies.<sup>15</sup> Marilyn Lake for example, writing at the time of the Republican referendum debate in 1996, argued that the story of nation was often told 'as a men's story, a white man's story'.<sup>16</sup> Women, she wrote, who looked to 'the national story' to find a sense of themselves and how they might fit in would be sorely disappointed.<sup>17</sup> But, as I argue in this essay,

women have been incorporated; indeed, they have demanded they be incorporated, especially at those moments that 'nation' has become a focus of popular and political attention. So for example the integration of white women into the pioneering legends of Australia's past can be quite clearly dated to the centenary and sesquicentenary celebrations in the Australian States in the 1930s, when women insisted that their role in settlement be recognised within the celebrations. However these arguments of exclusion rest not so much on an assertion of the lack of *any* female presence, so much as a critique of how they have been inserted and the limited and limiting form of this insertion. To the extent that women have figured in any story of the 'foundation of Australia', they have, I argue, figured as mythic Pioneer Women: as literal and figurative mothers of a nation, as a cumulative domesticating, civilising force in the former frontier societies.

### **Celebrating Women's Role in 'Founding a Nation'**

Building upon popular representations of the stoic pioneer woman by writers like Lawson, and Edward Sorenson, and artists like McCubbin, Australian women writers throughout the 1920s and '30s established a solid literary genre of Pioneer fiction with strong female protagonists.<sup>18</sup> The exclusive Australasian Women's Pioneer Society was established in 1929 along the same lines as the men's Australasian Pioneer Club. Throughout the 1930s women were honoured as Pioneers through the erection of memorials, gardens and monuments, and the publication in several states of a collection of essays on the contribution of pioneer women in the Colonies' histories.<sup>19</sup> Early feminists, at this important time of 'nation building', were keen to see women included within official histories of the early colonies. When the various states began to plan their anniversary celebrations (Centenary celebrations in Victoria in 1934 and South Australia in 1936; and national Sesquicentenary celebrations in 1938), a tribute to early settler white women

as Pioneers seemed ideal as a way of honouring women equally beside men within the commemorations.

During the New South Wales sesquicentenary celebrations the media of the time, encouraged by local Women's committees for the Centenary Council, reported on pioneer women in the colonies in their women's pages. *The Bulletin's* women's column promoted events organised for the sesquicentenary by the Women's Pioneer Society, and featured a review of *The Peaceful Army*, a volume commissioned by the Women's Executive Committee and Advisory Council for the sesquicentenary celebrations. *The Peaceful Army* featured essays by well-known writers honouring the contribution of pioneer women to the Australian colony.<sup>20</sup> Australian writer Mary Gilmore, for instance, wrote a laudatory piece on 'Women who faced the Wilderness' in the *Sydney Morning Herald*.<sup>21</sup> On the first page of its special sesquicentenary issue the *Australian Women's Weekly* honoured Caroline Chisholm as 'Our Greatest Woman Pioneer'. The headline for its full page review of *The Peaceful Army* read, 'These were the braves of early cradle days – Women Whose Names Will Live'. The edition's Special Editorial saluted 'our women' through the praising of the collective 'Pioneer Woman' who had 'turned those outposts into homes, the rough camps into townships... [and] helped to make her country'.<sup>22</sup>

While contemporary female writers like Miles Franklin and Dymphna Cusack recognised the necessity of women's inclusion in any commemorations, they nonetheless acknowledged that indiscriminate celebration could be mobilised by divergent groups to various purposes. Soon after the New South Wales sesquicentenary celebrations, Franklin and Cusack poked fun in their novel *Pioneers on Parade* (1939) with a story of the 'co-option' of the occasion. *Pioneers on Parade* took a satirical look at the celebrations and the way in which members of Sydney Society made use of the 'memorialising' of the colony's Pioneers to further their own ends.<sup>23</sup> The primary pioneers on

parade were the du Mont Brankstons, a family of social climbers ridiculed for their airs and graces and their superficial relations. The story follows the family as they embraced an old and previously ignored aunt in an attempt to ensure their (very visible) place within the celebrations:

‘Ah!’ ejaculated Audrey. ‘I’ve an idea. Let’s make something of our family fossil. We’ll insist that she has full honours on every possible occasion. One of only half a dozen or so free families in the State who have held the same land for more than a hundred years – and four sons killed at the war – and Anzac Day coming! We’ll play up Great Aunt Lucy for all it’s worth’.<sup>24</sup>

The family’s and, imply the authors, ‘high’ society’s manipulation of public commemoration was condemned, yet the pioneers themselves were still revered by the authors. They were presented sympathetically as honest, unpretentious, hardworking (‘her hands guaranteed her as a pioneer’) and stoic.<sup>25</sup> Franklin and Cusack identified a ‘myth’ at work in the celebrations, in the sense that they recognised within the celebrations a representation of history that was not seeking to show the realities of all early settler women, and one that was being put to the purpose of reinforcing the social privilege of white upper middle-class society. However they did not go on to flesh out their own characterisation of the ‘Pioneer Woman’ beyond the standard mould.

Franklin and Cusack were not the only ones to think critically about how pioneer women were celebrated within the anniversary commemorations. Even official publications like *The Peaceful Army* included pieces that raised some pointed questions with regards to the role that settler women had played in colonisation and how this was being represented within the sesquicentenary celebrations. Though overall a work quite conventional in tone it contained hints of a more complex history. Maryanne Dever in her

1988 review of the reissued publication noted this ambiguity.<sup>26</sup> Dever argued the offerings of writers such as Cusack, Eleanor Dark and Kylie Tennant upset a simple celebration of pioneer women and colonisation.<sup>27</sup> Their various writings confused the general, conservative, white Anglo-Celtic bias of the volume. For example, Cusack highlighted the exploitation of islanders as slave labour in the Bass Strait shipping industry.<sup>28</sup> Eleanor Dark went further, questioning whether Australia had anything to celebrate considering its appalling treatment of convicts, Indigenous peoples and emigrants in the new colony.<sup>29</sup> She indicted the imperial project as one of exploitation rather than development. Tennant puzzled over the meaning of pioneer, uncomfortable with assigning 'heroism' to all who came before.<sup>30</sup> The complicating and even challenging of pioneer definitions and histories questioned an indiscriminate celebration of pioneers. However while a number of individual essays within the text asked questions, the overall tone of the book was set by the foreword to the 1937 publication written by Lady Gowrie:

I am proud to join in trying to glorify the memory of those gallant and resourceful men and women who 'found the way' and slowly but triumphantly conquered the land and bequeathed it to us. It is their gift. It is they who have given us this beautiful country.<sup>31</sup>

Here, and also in the second foreword by Lady Wakehurst, one overarching meaning was fashioned for the volume that smoothed over the various, sometimes contradictory content of the pieces.

### **Pioneer Woman: Mother of an 'Australian Race'**

Finding harmony between the two enduring myths of the 1890s, that of the Australian Bush Legend and the Pioneer Legend, Ann Curthoys argued that both were silent on race and ethnicity.<sup>32</sup> By this she meant that both myths

rarely referenced the experiences of non-British immigrants and that relations between all those present on the pioneer frontier – white immigrants, non-British immigrants (such as the Chinese, Japanese, Pacific Islanders, and Pakistani traders) and the Australian Indigenous peoples – were only selectively alluded to.<sup>33</sup> Curthoys' analysis, however, overlooked the quite explicit discourse of 'whiteness' present, in which the Pioneer Woman appeared as the mother of a white Australian race.

The early part of the twentieth century in Australia was a period of heightened anxiety about the declining white birth rate and the potential dangers to the white race from elements within as well as from elements outside of the country's borders.<sup>34</sup> As Grimshaw, Lake and others have asserted, during this period the Australian female citizen's most important public and patriotic duty was conceived of as reproduction.<sup>35</sup> Women were quite literally conceived of as mother citizens giving birth to a nation. On the one hand there was considerable concern displayed for the 'fitness' of the current generation of young white women and their ability in terms of their responsibilities in continuing the race.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, there was almost uniform anxiety expressed by a white Australia over what was to be done about the 'half caste problem'.<sup>37</sup> Appearing as she does from the late 1920s through the '30s, it is not surprising then that the mythic Pioneer woman was quite explicitly figured as 'race mother' for the not long-settled white population. Early pioneer women, imagined as strong, and resourceful were not only 'Australian heroines', they were ideal, healthy genetic stock.

The editors of the *Australian Women's Weekly* invoked this fantasy of Pioneer Women as general 'race mothers' and as an imperial civilising force when they wrote in their editorial for the sesquicentenary issue: 'Without [Pioneer Women's] majestic courage, their patient endurance of hardship, loneliness, and incessant toil, and their divine inspiration, Australia would still be a savage land – peopled with white savages instead of black'.<sup>38</sup>

In this fantasy a white Australian race inherited the admirable characteristics of these brave women. This same presumption of a common ‘genetic’ Pioneer ancestress is explicit also in the contribution of Daisy Bates, journalist and Aboriginal Protector-cum-anthropologist, to the South Australian commemorative collection *Women in the First 100 years*. Bates stated that ‘[g]reat stress has always evoked just those qualities of steadfast endurance and endeavour, which are characteristics of our race’.<sup>39</sup>

Similarly Mary Gilmore’s ‘Ode to a Pioneer Woman’ referred to the heroic Pioneer Woman as the metaphorical mother to the heroic Anzac: ‘Of such as these was born the Anzac and his pride’.<sup>40</sup> This powerful trope of Pioneer Woman as ‘race mother’ has carried through into more recent popular representations. Honour Burcher’s *Pioneers and their Better Halves* (1985) wrote of the pioneer women of Australia as a ‘brave, self sacrificing race’, and in the introduction to *The Women Were There* (1988), Nance Donkin praised pioneer women as ‘more resilient, more adaptable than the men... it was these women who produced the first Australian born white children; survivors like their mother’.<sup>41</sup>

### **Domesticating the Frontier, Domesticating the Land**

The figuring of the pioneer woman as mother ties together the two consistent elements within the myth: race and domesticity. The Pioneer Woman created a ‘home’ for the white colonial settler on the frontier, a frontier broached by her husband and partner protagonist, the male pioneer. In line with nineteenth-century ideas of ‘separate spheres’ for men and women it was imagined that the pioneer man penetrated the frontier, the pioneer woman domesticated it. English social commentator John Ruskin’s influential essay ‘Of Queens and Gardens’, written in the 1880s, explained quite clearly this prevailing doctrine, outlining explicitly the different roles for men and women

within it. Men were 'active, progressive, defensive. [Man] is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer... his energy is for adventure, for war, and for conquest'.<sup>42</sup> Women on the other hand, Ruskin wrote, had a talent for 'sweet ordering, [and] arrangement'.<sup>43</sup>

It is interesting then that the Pioneer Woman myth that emerges to celebrate female pioneering experience in the colonies does not wholly adhere to Ruskin's allocation of roles. Pioneer women within the myth are represented very often as active; they personally face many of the same hardships as their male brethren. They are not 'protected from all danger and temptation' by their partners as Ruskin pronounced they should be. However, the myth presents the women as active *only* because they are protecting their home – Ruskin's 'place of peace' – from the dangers of the frontier. Ruskin saw women's role as one of safeguarding the home, especially from what he termed the 'penetrations' of the 'anxieties of the outer life... the inconsistently minded, unknown, unloved, or hostile society of the outer world'.<sup>44</sup> Ruskin's 'penetration' held a sexually-charged allusion that simultaneously referenced the masculinity of the public outside world and the femininity of the noble, private, inner sanctuary of the home. Thus any disturbance of the doctrine within the myth was quite effectively contained. The Pioneer Woman's active part in struggles on the frontier was warranted, as it was necessary for her to defend her womanly virtue.

At a practical as well as a metaphoric level then, creating 'home', for the Pioneer Woman, meant taming the wilderness of the bush; or as Nance Donkin described in her preface to *Always a Lady* (1990) it meant: 'to soften and to change the harsh outlines of the land'.<sup>45</sup> It meant moreover the drawing of lines, fences, and borders that marked ownership and private property over land. Ruth Dugen in her essay 'Early Women Settlers', for the centenary celebrations of South Australia in 1936, wrote of pioneer women: 'They have handed down to us a garden of flowers and a prosperous land. It

is our turn now; we must keep that garden fair and bright. We must as they did, help our men make this land more prosperous still, and clear the path that leads to contentment and peace'.<sup>46</sup> Jenny, the heroine of Dora Wilcox's admiring poem in *The Peaceful Army* survives the harsh climate and landscape of the new 'far country': 'to set Lilac and Lavender and hearts' ease/ In her new garden overseas'.<sup>47</sup>

Gardens were, of course, an important part of a domestic, colonial 'lived' experience for women, and figure widely in early women settlers' writings of their lives. Annie Baxter Dawbin in *Memories of the Past* described for her readers her 'very nice garden' which seemed to emerge from nothing 'as if by magic'.<sup>48</sup> Elizabeth Macarthur in her letters described her beautiful garden to her correspondents, a garden that would have been familiar to many of them back in England: 'It is now spring and the eye is delighted with the most beautiful, variegated landscape. In our garden, which is large, we have oranges, lemons, olives, almonds, grapes, peaches, apricots, nectarines, medlars, pears, apples, raspberries, strawberries, walnuts, cherries, plums. These fruits you know'.<sup>49</sup>

For many early colonial women cultivating garden and creating an idealised domestic space on the frontier was a clear way in which to bring a real sense of a lost 'home' to the colony. Annette Kolodny and Katie Holmes, in an American and Australian context respectively, have looked at the ways in which the creation of gardens by 'pioneering women' was a process by which these women were able to reflect back what Kolodny termed 'the images of their own deepest dreams and aspirations'.<sup>50</sup> These women, who had been culturally displaced, made their own place, through the transforming of their lived-in, particular space into something more familiar. Growing an English garden was not, however, simply a harking back to 'home', the bringing of metropole to the periphery. It rested on the assumption that there was nothing in the new colonies worth growing, nothing native that could or should be

cultivated. It imagined a desert, a bleak, uninhabited land of the new colony. In the ways in which such metaphorical and physical transformation ran parallel to the masculine conquest of the Australian landscape, the cultivation of an English garden embroiled women in the colonial project and, as Holmes argued, 'helped ensure the appropriation of Indigenous land'.<sup>51</sup>

### **The Pioneer Woman and her Garden**

For the 1938 sesquicentenary celebrations the Pioneer Women's Association organised for the establishment of a Women's Pioneer Memorial Garden in the Sydney Botanical Gardens. The editor of 'A Woman's Letter', the Women's section in the *Bulletin* reported:

The best thing that the women's committees and councils connected with the anniversary have done is the planting of a garden in memory of the pioneers. This garden is in the Botanic Gardens, within coo-ee of the Mitchell Library, and its leaf and herb will keep the memory of Australia's forebears green while time does its best to turn to dust the written words concerning them housed within the Mitchell.<sup>52</sup>

Similar gardens were established in Melbourne in 1935 during the centenary year of the founding of Melbourne, and in South Australia in 1941 out of the budget of the Women's Centenary Council of South Australia (see Figure 2).<sup>53</sup> These memorials might be read as 'memorial through re-enactment'. In the same way that early on the morning of the 25 January 1938 the Sydney public was able to watch 'Captain Arthur Phillip' arrive on the shores of Farm Cove, the memorial gardens were a living re-performance of the claiming of Australian land by white pioneer women.

The myth of the Pioneer woman, like that of the Pioneer Legend, has always been intimately connected with the claiming of land. However, women's quiet cultivation of 'garden' was surely a 'softer' and a more appropriately aesthetic act of appropriation of Indigenous land to celebrate than men's part in the demarcating of boundaries (which came more obviously with attendant shootings, and the sometimes violent massacre of Indigenous owners disputing the claims). Those celebrating the Pioneer Woman have commonly used the concept of the pioneer as good gardener as a metaphor for colonisation and women's role in 'civilising' the colonies. Margaret Reeson in *Certain Lives* (1989) wrote in conclusion of her homage to pioneer women: 'The flowers and bulbs remain. In the red earth the bulbs go on multiplying, bulbs that were planted long ago... home has been created in other homes, other households of other years. The bulbs multiply and flower again where they are planted'.<sup>54</sup>

Reeson's conclusion clearly drew a tangible connection between past and present. It underlined the notion of linear, genealogical history embedded within the myth and reinforced the Pioneer Woman as mother – essential to the reproduction of an 'Australian race' – whose 'natural' claim over land lies in her ability to make it fertile and to civilise it. The Pioneer Women's Gardens as re-performance and signifier of their reproduction stands as a powerful metaphor for a celebrated colonisation.

### **Tracing back 'Our' Pioneer Roots**

The Pioneer Woman as mother/reproducer of an Australian race expresses itself most clearly through the functionings of the still-thriving Australasian Women's Pioneer Society. For the Women's Pioneer Society of Australasia – the society responsible for the erection of the Pioneer Woman Statue in Circular Quay – pioneer genealogy as a tangible link to a history of pioneering is a strict criteria of membership. Only those who can claim to be the direct

female descendent of a woman who resided in the colony before a certain date (this depends upon the state) can become a member, although there are more lenient qualifications for associate members. To a certain extent the Society's membership criteria have overtime accommodated changing perceptions of the Pioneer Woman. They jovially explain to outsiders that membership can now be extended to those who count convict women as ancestors. It's a strange twist that convict women, so low in the pecking order of colonial society, might now be a link into a prestigious and exclusive club.

Reflecting back upon the unveiling of the Pioneer Woman statue, Zena Hodgkinson articulated a sense of relief. She was relieved, she said, because now 'whatever happens to the Women's Pioneer Society and our country it [the statue] will still be there, with the society's name preserved'.<sup>55</sup> Not only does it preserve the Society and their regard for the Pioneer Woman, but it acts to sustain the myth: a mythology that allows Anglo-Australians a comfortable, uncomplicated and positive historical understanding of their past, one that obscures the unpalatable and always-confronting colonial history of invasion and Indigenous dispossession. Although the commemoration of the Pioneer Woman was explained by its proponents as a feminist project of inserting women into history, the ease with which women were able to insert themselves into an existing Pioneer narrative – without radically upsetting that narrative – suggests that incorporation was not subversive to its core construction or its utility as a legitimating (Anglo-) Australian story of nation. It is not, it would seem, to nationalist discourse or stories of nation that women, or for that matter men, must look if they hope to find 'a sense of themselves', or more importantly, challenge the structures that exclude or marginalise them from participation in the political or public sphere. Despite its apparent inclusiveness, in the extent to which the myth of the Pioneer Woman coheres within conservative discourses of race, gender and class, the myth endorses the closed and exclusive concept of nation.

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<sup>1</sup> As examples of its continuing presence in popular historical narratives: the Nine network's television show *McLeod's Daughters*, which recently screened (in Series 6, Episode 163) an historically-themed episode that 'uncovered' the foundational role in the small fictional township of Gungellan of an ancestress of one of the main female protagonists in the show; Susanna De Vries (who published the first of her many successful books on the subject of pioneer women, *Pioneer Women, Pioneer Land*, in 1987) has also just released *Great Pioneer Women of the Outback* (2005). Furthermore, the Australasian Pioneer Women's Society, an institutional incarnation of the myth, continues to fund awards for university scholarship in the area. It should be noted, however, that the adjudication of such awards is left to individual university departments and that the source of award funding does not necessarily imply recipients write only celebratory or uncritical histories. See for instance: Susanna De Vries, *Great Pioneer Women of the Outback*, Harper Collins Publishers, Pymble, NSW, 2005; *Pioneer Women, Pioneer Land: Yesterday's Tall Poppies*, Angus and Robertson, North Ryde, NSW, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> Zena Hodgkinson, 'A Written Personal Account of the "Statue Project"', in *Papers concerning the Bicentennial Pioneer Woman Statue 1985-88* (Mitchell Library, 1999). Her emphasis.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Carter, 'A Bronzed Tribute to Those Who Paved the Way', *The Australian*, 25 November 1988; Figure 1: Alex Koloszy's Pioneer Woman Monument (Bronze) in the Jessie Street Gardens, Circular Quay, Sydney, Picture: Anthea Vogl.

<sup>4</sup> Henry Lawson, *The Drover's Wife and Other Stories*, Hodder and Stoughton, Hornsby, 1974. *The Drover's Wife* was first published in the *Bulletin* in 1892; Mary Gilmore, 'Ode to a Pioneer Woman', in Flora S. Eldershaw (ed.), *The Peaceful Army: A Memorial to the Pioneer Women of Australia 1788-1938*, Women's Executive Committee and Advisory Council of Australia's 150th Anniversary Celebrations, Sydney, 1938; Frederick McCubbin, 'The Pioneer', 1904, oil on canvas (3 panels).

<sup>5</sup> Koloszy's draft designs can be found in the manuscript collection: Hodgkinson, 'A Written Personal Account of the "Statue Project"'.

<sup>6</sup> Judith Godden, 'A New Look at the Pioneer Woman', *Hecate*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1979), pp. 7-21.

<sup>7</sup> Judith Godden, 'A New Look at the Pioneer Woman', p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Annie Baxter Dawbin (ed.), *Memories of the Past: By a Lady*, W.H. Williams, Melbourne, 1873. Baxter is celebrated as a Pioneer Woman in, for example, Nance Donkin, *Always a Lady: Courageous Women of Colonial Australia*, Collins Dove, Melbourne, 1990, pp. 39-52.

<sup>9</sup> John Hirst, 'The Pioneer Legend', *Historical Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 71 (1978), pp. 316-37.

<sup>10</sup> John Hirst, 'The Pioneer Legend', p. 316.

<sup>11</sup> Pamela Lukin Watson, *Frontier Lands and Pioneer Legends*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1998, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Ann Curthoys, 'Expulsion, Exodus and Exile in White Australian Historical Mythology', *Journal of Australian Studies*, No. 61 (1999), pp. 1-23.

<sup>13</sup> Ann Curthoys, 'Expulsion, Exodus and Exile in White Australian Historical Mythology', p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Ann Curthoys, 'Expulsion, Exodus and Exile in White Australian Historical Mythology', p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> See for example: Marilyn Lake, 'The Republic, the Federation and the Intrusion of the Political', *Journal of Australian Studies*, No. 47 (1996), pp. 5-15; 'Frontier Feminism and the Marauding White Man', *Journal of Australian Studies*, No. 49 (1996), pp. 12-20; Miriam Dixon, *The Real Matilda: Women and Identity in Australia, 1788 to the Present*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 1998; and Anne Summers, *Damned Whores and God's Police*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1994.

<sup>16</sup> Marilyn Lake, 'The Republic, the Federation and the Intrusion of the Political', p. 8.

<sup>17</sup> Marilyn Lake, 'The Republic, the Federation and the Intrusion of the Political', p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> Henry Lawson, *The Drover's Wife and Other Stories*; Edward Sorenson, *Life in the Australian Backblocks*, Currey O'Neil, Melbourne, 1984 [originally 1911], McCubbin, 'The Pioneer'. For examples of the genre, see: Miles Franklin, *All That Swagger*, The Bulletin, Sydney, 1936; Mary Fullerton, *The Australian Bush*, J. M. Dent, London, 1928; Mary Fullerton, *Bark House Days*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1964 [originally 1921]; Katherine Susannah Pritchard, *The Pioneers*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1963 [originally 1911]. For a

critical review of some of this Pioneer literature see Susan Sheridan, *Along the Faultlines: Sex, Race and Nation in Australian Women's Writing 1880s-1930s*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1995.

<sup>19</sup> Women's Centenary Council of Australia, *A Book of South Australia: Women in the First 100 Years*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1936; Flora Eldershaw (ed.), *The Peaceful Army*; Frances Fraser and Nettie Palmer (eds), *The Centenary Gift Book*, Robertson & Mullens for The Women's Centenary Council, Melbourne, 1934.

<sup>20</sup> Editor, 'The Red Page', *The Bulletin*, 5 January 1938; Editor, 'A Woman's Letter', *The Bulletin*, 12 January 1938.

<sup>21</sup> Mary Gilmore, 'Women Who Faced the Wilderness', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 January 1938.

<sup>22</sup> Editor, 'An Editorial: Salute Our Women!', *Australian Women's Weekly*, 29 January 1938; Editor, 'Our Greatest Woman Pioneer', *Australian Women's Weekly*, 29 January 1938; Editor, 'These Were the Braves of Our Early Cradle Days, Women Whose Names Will Live', *Australian Women's Weekly*, 29 January 1938; Editor, 'What Women Are Doing', *Australian Women's Weekly*, 29 January 1938.

<sup>23</sup> Dymphna Cusack and Miles Franklin, *Pioneers on Parade*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1939.

<sup>24</sup> Dymphna Cusack and Miles Franklin, *Pioneers on Parade*, p. 21.

<sup>25</sup> Dymphna Cusack and Miles Franklin, *Pioneers on Parade*, p. 7.

<sup>26</sup> Maryanne Dever, 'Still Partially Eclipsed (a Review of the Peaceful Army: A Memorial to the Women Pioneers of Australia, 1788-1938)', *Hecate* Vol.14, No. 2 (1988), p. 91.

<sup>27</sup> See Maryanne Dever, 'Still Partially Eclipsed', p. 91.

<sup>28</sup> Dymphna Cusack, 'Mary Reiby and Her Times', in Flora Eldershaw (ed.), *The Peaceful Army*, pp. 37-57.

<sup>29</sup> Eleanor Dark, 'Caroline Chisholm and Her Times', in *The Peaceful Army*, pp. 131-137.

<sup>30</sup> Kylie Tennant, 'Pioneering Still Goes On', in *The Peaceful Army*, pp. 131-137.

<sup>31</sup> Lady Gowrie, 'Foreword', in *The Peaceful Army*, p. [ix].

<sup>32</sup> Ann Curthoys, 'Expulsion, Exodus and Exile in White Australian Historical Mythology', p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> In all of the sesquicentenary reportage in the *Bulletin*, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Australian Women's Weekly* there is only a single reference to relations between Indigenous peoples and non Indigenous women. It is buried away in the 'What Women Are Doing' column in *Australian Women's Weekly* and reports on M.M. Bennett of Western Australia (presumably Mary Bennett, a leading white humanitarian reformer and human rights activist) and her involvement in the Day of Mourning protests. The Day of Mourning is here however neatly glossed as 'the natives' contribution' to the anniversary celebrations. Editor, 'What Women Are Doing', *Australian Women's Weekly*, 29 January 1938.

<sup>34</sup> Nikki Henningham, "'Hats off, Gentleman, to Our Australian Mothers!'" Representations of White Femininity in North Queensland in the Early Twentieth Century', *Australian Historical Studies*, No.117 (2001), pp. 311-321.

<sup>35</sup> Patricia Grimshaw, et al., *Creating a Nation*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1994. See also Marilyn Lake, 'The Inviolable Woman: Feminist Conceptions of Citizenship in Australia 1900-1945', *Gender and History*, Vol. 8, No.2 (1996), pp. 197-211.

<sup>36</sup> Nikki Henningham, "'Hats off, Gentleman, to Our Australian Mothers!'", pp. 312-314. See also Caroline Evans and Naomi Parry, 'Vessels of Progressivism? Tasmanian State Girls and Eugenics, 1900-1940', *Australian Historical Studies*, No.117 (2001), pp. 322-333.

<sup>37</sup> Alison Holland, 'Wives and Mothers Like Ourselves? Exploring White Women's Intervention in the Politics of Race, 1920-1940s', *Australian Historical Studies*, No.117 (2001), pp. 292-310; and see Nikki Henningham, "'Hats off, Gentleman, to Our Australian Mothers!'", pp. 314, 317-318.

<sup>38</sup> Editor, 'An Editorial: Salute Our Women!', *Australian Women's Weekly*, 29 January 1938.

<sup>39</sup> Daisy Bates, 'Our Pioneer Women and Our Natives', in *A Book of South Australia*, p. 35.

<sup>40</sup> Mary Gilmore, 'Ode to a Pioneer Woman', in *The Peaceful Army*, p. 14.

<sup>41</sup> Honour Burcher, *Pioneers and Their Better Halves, or, Seven Generations of Women in Australia*, Boolarong, Brisbane, 1985, p. vi; Nance Donkin, *The Women Were There*, Collins Dove, Melbourne, 1988, p. 3.

<sup>42</sup> John Ruskin, *Sesames and Lilies*, Temple Press, London, 1929 [originally 1882], pp. 110-111.

<sup>43</sup> John Ruskin, *Sesames and Lilies*, pp. 110-111.

<sup>44</sup> John Ruskin, *Sesames and Lilies*, p. 111.

<sup>45</sup> Nance Donkin, *Always a Lady: Courageous Women of Colonial Australia*, Preface.

<sup>46</sup> Ruth Dugen, 'Early Women Settlers', in Women's Centenary Council of Australia (ed.), *A Book of South Australia: Women in the First 100 Years*, p. [ix].

<sup>47</sup> Dora Wilcox, 'Jenny', in *The Peaceful Army*, p. 35.

<sup>48</sup> Anni Baxter Dawbin, *Memories of the Past: By a Lady*, p. 13.

<sup>49</sup> Elizabeth Macarthur to friend, quoted in Barnard Eldershaw, 'The Happy Pioneer - Elizabeth Macarthur', in *The Peaceful Army*, p. 14.

<sup>50</sup> Annette Kolodny, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1984, p. viii. See also Katie Holmes, 'Gardens', *Journal of Australian Studies*, No.61, June 1999, pp. 152-166.

<sup>51</sup> Katie Holmes, 'Gardens', p. 155.

<sup>52</sup> Editor, 'A Woman's Letter', *The Bulletin*, 12 January 1938.

<sup>53</sup> An image of the Pioneer Women's Memorial Garden, King William Road, Adelaide, South Australia, can be viewed on the website of the National Library of Australia, at: <http://nla.gov.au/nla.pic-an24835758>; Figure 2: Pioneer Women's Memorial Garden, Alexandra Avenue, part of Kings Domain Garden, Melbourne, Picture: EasyWeddings, at: [www.EasyWeddings.com.au](http://www.EasyWeddings.com.au).

<sup>54</sup> Margaret Reeson, *Certain Lives*, Albatross Books, Sutherland, 1989, p. 436.

<sup>55</sup> Hodgkinson, 'A Written Personal Account of the "Statue Project"'.