The Formative Years, Individuality and Growth in the Australian Settler Subject: A Focus on the Life and Colonial Texts of Lucy Gray

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The formative years of middle and upper class British women who wrote about colonial life have been, in many cases, overlooked as much as, or more than, the writers themselves and their actual participation in the colonial enterprise. This is particularly true of women who went to the colonies as adults, and who saw the colonial situation from a different perspective than those who were born there – a perspective informed by a complex mix of idealised and stylised interpretations of race, religion and science formulated in Britain. In this article, I trace the formative years of one particular middle-class woman, Lucy Gray (née Waters) (1840–1879), and explore ways in which her early life in England, Ireland and New Zealand may have impacted upon her written and pictorial representations of colonial life in Australia. Her personal growth in relation to an evolving understanding of her new environment is an important focus, as she reveals aspects of colonial life often overlooked by male counterparts.

In discussions involving British colonisation we tend to think of middle and upper class ‘Victorian women’ as an homogenous group that left sheltered and often privileged environments in the ‘old’ country to be confronted with a raw and sometimes dangerous colonial wilderness. There, the once more easily applicable ideals of their formative years were often tested, and even questioned. Meanwhile, in much historical discourse relating to the colonies, life-writing such as diaries, journals and personal correspondence produced by women, and the individual circumstance and past experience of female writers, are marginalised as much as, or more than, women themselves have been in the writing of colonial history. The lack of investigation into an individual’s formative years is particularly problematic, and might be considered alongside observations by Australian historian Bain Attwood that the homogenous grouping of Aboriginal peoples fails to take into account individual and regional differences that contradict the convenient use of the collective term ‘Aborigines’.

This article addresses the formative years of one particular colonial woman, Lucy Gray (née Waters), and the influence her past may have had on her representations of the colonial experience and her personal growth during that period. In doing so, it explores some of the limits of the western historical canon, which traditionally tends to favour primary source material produced by men. I focus on Lucy’s original handwritten journal, brief diary and embedded sketches created while living with her husband, Charles, in north Queensland, Australia, between 1868 and 1875. I also include copies of several of Lucy’s paintings, the originals of which are held by descendants of Charles Gray and his second wife Emily.

Although transcription and publication of a selection of women’s writings from colonial Australia have already been expertly undertaken by Australian scholars such as Lucy Frost and Elizabeth Webby, by concentrating on only one woman I am able to analyse her texts carefully, exploring more comprehensively any special characteristics, while also investigating the early years that informed
later representations. The Queensland journal takes the form of an extended letter to be sent home in instalments to family and friends in Britain, although Lucy’s careful attention to written expression indicates that she may have had eventual publication in mind. On the other hand, the short diary is distinctly categorised by the author as ‘private’, thus permitting the occasional inclusion of expressions of disappointment at being left alone so often during her husband’s mustering expeditions. Even so, well aware that a diary can never be considered entirely private, negative reactions to her social and cultural deprivation are usually suppressed, or simply implied by rows of dots and dashes amongst the written text, indicating complaints left unsaid as a mark of respect for the feelings of her husband, who might one day read her ‘private’ writings.

Throughout the more public journal, Lucy’s sensitivity to the feelings and understandings of her close-knit family group is demonstrated in the careful explication of details of colonial life, details often overlooked by male counterparts. This ‘female’ writing, informed by a Victorian background of nurturing, attention to detail of dress, and consideration for the feelings of others, adds texture and colour to the often more scientific and impersonal ‘male’ accounts of colonial life. A caring attitude is also reflected in certain silences, which tend to play down the ever-present dangers that surrounded settlers in North Queensland at the time, in particular the fear of attacks by Aborigines whose land and life-style had been drastically altered by white settlement. These silences, exposed by more explicit detail in personal correspondence and diaries from the period, reveal much about, not only the writer’s desire to placate a concerned family in England, but also her loyalty to a husband who was struggling to make a success of his new enterprise. In reality, cattle and sheep were continually speared and disturbed by displaced Aboriginal groups, who were then often hunted and killed by property owners.

Lucy may disguise the extent of the violence that was taking place around her, however her personal reaction to the Indigenous peoples of Queensland is well represented in her written and pictorial texts. In this, as in other areas, her earliest Australian writings refer back to idealised understandings formulated in Europe. However, they are soon replaced by representations that demonstrate a growing realisation of, not only the complexity of racial interaction, but also the special characteristics of the Australian natural environment and its indigenous peoples. As such, I argue that texts like those of Lucy Gray are useful indicators of how colonial attitudes were influenced by a psychological and ideological ‘carry-over’ from overseas, but were gradually adapted to fit the very different situations in which the white settlers found themselves. Viewed from a female perspective, new facets of racial interaction are revealed, at the same time demonstrating the personal growth of the writer.

Lucy Gray was born Lucy Sarah Waters on 8 August 1840 in Parsonstown, Ireland, a small town approximately sixty-two miles west of Dublin. The town is now known as Birr. Her father, John Waters, was a physician of Anglo-Irish descent who took up a medical practice in Parsonstown in 1832. John married Helena Robinson, Lucy’s mother, soon after his graduation, and their first child, Caroline, was born in 1834. The growing Waters family lived in a house in prestigious Oxmantown Mall, which they rented from the second and third Earls of Rosse who lived at neighbouring Birr Castle. At the time, doctors, bankers and other service industries were flourishing in Parsonstown, supported by the large population of soldiers at the barracks in nearby Crinkle. There were also scientists involved with the revolutionary giant telescope being constructed during the 1840s and 1850s in the Birr Castle demesne. Officers in the barracks, and in rented Georgian houses in the Parsonstown Malls, along with the scientifically inclined family in the Castle and their supporters, and prominent professionals like Dr Waters along with his family, formed a social nucleus that attracted a genteel and intelligent society to settle in the town. In 1841, the year after Lucy was born, the population was 6,336, with another 554 in nearby Crinkle.

Lady Mary, wife of the third Earl of Rosse, was a pioneer in early photography, and had her own darkroom in the castle. She also designed and participated in the building of the ornate iron gates that still stand at the entrance to Birr Castle demesne at the western end of Oxmantown Mall. Her accomplishments provided visible evidence to the girls in and around Parsonstown that feats in chemistry and engineering need not necessarily be restricted to men. Although such activities were
beyond the financial means of most, Lucy and her sisters, living at the other end of Oxnantown Mall, must have been impressed by Lady Mary’s achievements, her influence almost certainly inspiring the sense of independence and enterprise that is reflected in Lucy’s later writings. Meanwhile, in stark contrast, poverty and associated diseases were threatening the lives of the working-class people of Ireland. In 1842, two years after Lucy was born, a union workhouse, capable of housing 800 destitute people, was opened in Parsonstown. However, inmates soon spilled out into other premises around the town. The diet of labourers had consisted mainly of potatoes with milk, and wages ranged from 8 pence to 10 pence per day. The potato famine of 1845–47 was to impact dramatically on these people. Concerned for the welfare of the poor, during the worst of the potato famine over 500 starving men were employed by Lord and Lady Rosse in the extensive Birr Castle demesne.

In this precarious, but at the same time intellectually stimulating, environment the more fortunate Lucy Waters, and her eight siblings, sisters Caroline, Elizabeth, Amy, Adelaide and Georgina, and brothers Thomas, John and Ernest, were to survive to adulthood. Another sister, Helen, died at ten years of age, and seven of the eleven children born at neighbouring Birr Castle succumbed to the diseases that were spreading through the town and district. This included Countess Mary’s only daughter Alice, who was born the year before Lucy and died at eight years of age. Surprisingly, typhus proved more deadly among the middle and upper classes than among the peasantry, as body-louse, carried by the ‘swarms of beggars that patrolled the roads’, infected everyone. Only a few years separated Alice, and Helen and Lucy Waters, who were more than likely friends, and almost certainly rode their ponies together in the Castle demesne, where Lucy learned the riding skills that would hold her in good stead for her life in outback Queensland. The deaths of Helen and Alice, not to mention other children at the Castle and around the town, must have left a lasting impression on Lucy. The experience may also have influenced her seemingly harsh attitude to the plight of Aboriginal children taken from their families by British settlers in Australia, whom she probably thought fortunate when compared with the children she had seen orphaned, starving and dying in her home-land.
The scientific discussions that centred on the Castle telescope, and public lectures on a range of other scientific subjects that were being encouraged by the government, some of which were held in Parsonstown, must have opened the children’s eyes to endless possibilities. This was certainly the case with Lucy’s brothers, who went on to study architecture and engineering, and to work in countries around the world. Lucy, being female, was obliged to channel her skills into her art and writing, but her sense of adventure and enquiring mind were almost certainly stimulated by those early years at Parsonstown.

With Dr Waters’ income, and his superior position in the community, the Waters children may have attended private, single sex schools in the town. However, private tutors and governesses cannot be ruled out. Towards the end of Lucy’s time in Ireland (1857) there was a growing trend to follow the English example in providing an education for girls similar to that available for boys, with the inclusion of Mathematics and Latin. With this in mind, Dr Waters may have preferred carefully selected tutors and governesses for all his children, people who concentrated more on academic subjects, meanwhile leaving the teaching of such things as religious instruction and manners to his wife. There are signs of a sophisticated education in literature and written expression in the excellent prose adopted throughout Lucy’s Queensland journal, and she also indicates a preference for intellectual reading matter.

During the 1830s and 1840s John Waters treated many victims of the cholera and typhoid epidemics that had spread to Parsonstown, and attended to other illnesses exacerbated by famine. However, having survived the worst of it, he died suddenly of ‘fever’ in early 1857, aged only forty-eight. The Waters family then left the Oxmantown Street address and moved to England. Lucy was just sixteen when they left Ireland, and seems to have been somewhat of a handful for her bereaved mother, perhaps suggesting closer ties with her late father. There is little doubt that family tensions,
and a longing for independence, encouraged her eventual desire to get away from the family and travel overseas.  

During 1860 Lucy was sent to boarding school in Bruge, Belgium, where she learnt the drawing and painting skills that enabled her skilful pictorial representations of colonial life. A letter in French from an old school friend from Bruges confirms her education there, although no other documentation exists for the period from 1857 to 1861. Later correspondence indicates that the Waters family was supported financially by relatives, by taking in paying boarders, and through the generosity of the adult Waters boys, Thomas in particular. The 1861 England census has Helena Waters living with her younger children in a spacious cottage at Dorking, while Lucy and sister Elizabeth were living (or staying) with their uncle Oliver Robinson in London. Then, between 1862 and 1868 Helena and some of her family were at 17 Belgrave Place, Brighton – a prestigious address from which the widow hoped to find husbands for her daughters.

However, in October 1862 at the age of twenty-two, Lucy travelled to New Zealand with about one hundred female emigrants, acting as companion to the organiser, Miss Maria Rye, who had helped found the Female Middle-Class Emigration Society earlier that year. Lucy may have been inspired to travel by the favourable press that women’s travel writing was receiving, along with various articles both praising and criticising Miss Rye’s ambitions. However, she was no doubt also encouraged by Miss Rye’s enthusiasm, and the fact that they both had Evangelical leanings. In many ways Lucy fitted the stereotype of the educated middle-class female who had fallen on hard times after the death of a father, and whose prospects of marriage were limited, not only because of her family’s financial situation, but also because of the large imbalance between men and women in Britain. The press frequently brought this imbalance to the notice of the public and, in 1862, the *Nation Review* and *Fraser’s Magazine* both published articles outlining the advantages of female emigration as a means of alleviating the situation. With this background, Lucy must have had little trouble convincing Miss Maria Rye to include her in the group.

Lucy worked as a governess for approximately three years while in New Zealand, living near Nelson in the South Island. This was a place that had been settled by Europeans approximately twenty years earlier, and was therefore less confronting than the newly settled north Queensland region where she would later live. Letters from Lucy covering this period no longer exist, but other family correspondence points to depression and homesickness, in spite of making some friends and visiting the more ‘civilised’ Dunedin from time to time. Unmarried and unhappy, she returned by sailing ship to England via Sydney in early 1866, having managed to save up the fare.

Less than two years after her return to England Lucy met Charles Gray at Brighton. The son of a well-respected Brighton family, Charles was working as a captain in the English Merchant Marine when they met. His marriage proposal came as a surprise, but Lucy accepted almost immediately. He then resigned from his position and, following their marriage in 1868, the couple, both aged twenty-seven, sailed almost immediately for Queensland where Charles had agreed to join his brother Robert in a grazing enterprise. Helena Water’s joy at her daughter’s ‘suitable’ marriage must have been clouded somewhat by the dread of losing her once again, this time to the less hospitable and harsh environment of Queensland. On the other hand, Lucy was no doubt drawn to the prospect of the exhilarating sense of freedom and independence the Australian colonies were supposed to offer, and which was being promoted in the English press – an independence that she lacked in England and had found to some extent in New Zealand.

The couple made their home in far north Queensland on the cattle station Glendower, about three hundred kilometres inland from the relatively new coastal settlement of Townsville. They lived there until 1875 in what was still very much a frontier region, where attack by indigenous people was a real possibility and the remoteness of the station made life extremely lonely for a woman – although Lucy bore it bravely for the sake of her husband. Unlike the cooler climate in New Zealand, at Glendower the temperature rises to over 40 degrees centigrade in summer and, during the wet season, floods isolate homesteads for weeks or even months on end. Having grown accustomed to a more comfortable life in New Zealand, and then once again the companionship of family and friends in England, Lucy had to make many adjustments on her arrival at her new home.
These adjustments are reflected in the texts, as Lucy reveals aspects of Australian life that are often overlooked by contemporary male writers, and taken for granted by women born there.

Lucy’s first impressions of Australia are of particular interest, and reflect a self-conscious challenging of English (and indeed British colonial) ideologies. Monica Anderson has found such a challenging problematic in the women’s travel writing she has examined, due to what she describes as the strong influence of prevailing representations of Empire. On her first voyage up the Queensland coast by steamer Lucy remarks:

> Everyone had told me that it was a dreary, ugly place. But as I have often found, the generality of people don’t know what is pretty unless they are told – Australians, especially, don’t seem to care for any place that is quite wild [and] uncultivated. They prefer trim, well-kept gardens, [and] open country without many hills or trees.

Lucy’s time in a heavily forested region of New Zealand may have prepared her to be more open-minded when viewing the endless Australian bush. However, her ability to immediately absorb and accept new surroundings is quite unusual. With her background of specialised education, training in visual art, and previous overseas travel she was not afraid to enthusiastically embrace new landscapes and unfamiliar cultural experiences.

Both adaptation and artistic skills are demonstrated in the black and white painting in Fig. 3. Here, Lucy has produced an excellent representation of the Glendower holding paddock, viewed from the front veranda of the homestead. Her interest in things beyond the domestic sphere, encouraged by an enquiring mind, a sense of adventure, and almost certainly her enlightened upbringing, is strongly evoked in her depiction of the small mob of cattle in the centre of the picture. Her growing familiarity with the behaviour of wild bush cattle is obvious as she shows the animals looking longingly off towards their favourite bush grazing lands, from where they have just been mustered for market. Lucy often joined her husband mustering cattle on horseback and, in spite of the ever-present danger from Aboriginal attack, spent many hours riding through the bush alone, or bathing in the nearby Flinders River.

Fig. 3 View from Glendower homestead. This pen and ink wash reflects the drawing instruction Lucy received in Belgium, and the depiction of a mob of cattle indicates an empathy with her new surroundings (Original 14 x 7.5 inches. B. Hollinrake, Canada).
The painting by Lucy of the Flinders in flood, as shown in Fig. 4, also evokes a strong sense of place and empathy with her surroundings, and a certain spirituality is present when the painting is considered alongside her written description of the big flood of 1870. Lucy writes:

All the islands that I was so fond of have vanished. Just opposite the station there was one with very large trees, so thick [and] shady that we could not see the opposite side. Now the only trace of it is a few twisted roots in the sand. One huge gum stood alone after all the others had gone ... I was quite grieved when, having stood the worst of it, after the water had begun to subside, it shook two or three times as it if had received a violent blow, bowed once, twice, [and] laid itself softly down (so it seemed, in the roar of the water we could not hear the agony of its breaking roots) and was carried away.

Fig. 4 A watercolour by Lucy of the Flinders River in flood. The evocative movement of trees and water in this picture confirms that Lucy was an experienced and accomplished artist, quick to observe and adapt to new environments (Copy courtesy R. Ormerod, New Zealand).

In the written and pictorial texts depicting the flooded Flinders we have the benefit of a two-dimensional representation from a female perspective. This strongly evokes the sense of place suggested by Peter Read in his discussions about non-Aboriginal connections to land. However, the awe implicit in Lucy’s description of the falling tree and the power of the flood is also reminiscent of indigenous belief in the spiritual forces of nature. In some ways, her texts suggest a deeper involvement with the natural environment than that revealed by much contemporary male discourse which, in spite of Read’s examples to the contrary, often tends to focus on control and power over landscape, rather than empathy with it.

I now look at ways in which Lucy describes, both through her writing and her drawing, her encounters with the Aboriginal people of north Queensland. I trace her progress as she comes to terms with their appearance and behaviour, meanwhile extricating herself from earlier expectations.
Describing the first Aborigines she encounters near Townsville, Lucy considers their living conditions and diet in relation to that of Europeans:

The blacks seem miserable enough to people who cannot imagine happiness without comfort, but really in their free open life, they are far happier than the poor in crowded alleys [and] close rooms of large towns. We think they must be [wretched] having to eat rats [and] snakes. They consider them delicacies [and] there is no very great difference between rats [and] rabbits, snakes [and] eels, except taste [and] customs.30

This is an excellent example of cultural mediation between colony and familiar metropole, produced for the benefit of those back home unfamiliar with colonial conditions and foreign cultures. As I have said, even in her early observations Lucy was prepared to accept life and landscapes from a non-British perspective. Her easy acceptance of the appropriateness of an ‘alien’ life-style seems to refer back to the scientific milieu of her formative years, a milieu which encouraged observations divorced from familiar experience.

While still new to colonial life, Lucy reflects on the learning ability of Aborigines compared with the South Sea Islander employees of the Grays.31 Her limited knowledge of the popular science of phrenology, perhaps overheard during her father’s medical discussions and enlarged upon through her reading, is suggested in the following extract from her journal:

The native blacks until they have been some time with white people [and] become partly civilized do not seem to have the organ of [the next word looks like ‘wonder’] [and] gase look with indifference on whatever they are not accustomed to see – they the wild ones have only a part of their faculties awakened in use the rest they are very keen – the rest have not been awakened.32

The study of phrenology was a popular pseudo-science at the time, and Lucy attempts to apply it to the local people. She refers to contemporary views on racial difference based on physical characteristics, which were seen by some to indicate degrees of intellectual ability. However, as an amateur scientist she has crossed out words like ‘bump’ and ‘organ’, perhaps to avoid offence to her readers, or maybe as an indication of her uncertainty as to the correct terminology. Although she seems doubtful as to the possibility of Aborigines having the same level of intelligence as Europeans, she acknowledges their potential to ‘awaken’ and adapt to European ‘civilisation’. With an increased questioning of religion by way of science, many Europeans were emphasising racial difference based on physical characteristics such as skin colour which, in turn, were thought to indicate intellectual ability.33 It was also to become ideologically useful for some British colonists to see Aborigines as ‘living fossils’ who were obstructing colonial expansion and were, in any case, destined to die out.34 This confusion is reflected in Lucy’s writings as she vacillates between recognition of shared humanity and the concept of Aborigines as inferior beings.

Sara Mills, a feminist writer who, like Monica Anderson, has studied women’s travel writing, notes that British women often took on a maternal role in relation to Indigenous women, ‘a role that challenged neither the imperial assertion of superiority’ nor the assertion that ‘natives’ were ‘childlike’.35 In both her journal and diary Lucy tells how she ‘trains’ the Aboriginal girl Moggie, taken from her family by Lucy’s brother-in-law to act as a household servant, but she expresses no sympathy for the girl’s predicament.36 Moggie is expected to comply at all times with British standards, however, the girl remains very much a child throughout Lucy’s writing, unable to learn with the speed and enthusiasm of even the Aboriginal boys.37 One is forced to ask whether this is the gendered reaction of which Mills speaks. In spite of Lucy’s ‘inspired’ background, perhaps she still anticipated a difference between the learning potential of males and females.

Although Lucy is sometimes frustrated with Moggie, by 27 March 1870 she has become resigned to her servant’s little idiosyncrasies, and seems somewhat proud to refer to her as her ‘maid’, at least in her diary. She writes: ‘Went down to look at the melons with my maid Moggie.’38 Then, on an unidentified day in May 1870, recognition of shared humanity becomes an important, if temporary, part of the discourse: ‘Moggie laid up with a [needle?] in her knee – requiring treating night [and]
day.’ The treatment was not immediately successful and, on 5 June 1870, she writes: ‘Moggie very bad all the past week.’

Although the girl’s illness required some degree of human compassion, and a certain knowledge of medicine, both no doubt acquired from her doctor father, most of the diary entries, and even the journal, suggest an impersonal attitude towards the indigenous servants at Glendower. Of course silences, and a seemingly offhand attitude, may indicate selective reporting, certain facts only being revealed to comply with familial beliefs of racial superiority and class structure. Lucy’s private concerns about the fate of the original inhabitants, if she had any, remain unclear and undefined as she translates the colonial circumstance for the benefit of her family, and remains loyal to her husband and his endeavours.

Lucy’s drawing training in Belgium enables an insight into an evolving understanding of the appearance of Aboriginal people. One of Lucy’s first attempts at recreating an encounter with an Aboriginal woman is depicted in a written extract enhanced by the pen and ink sketch in Fig. 5. The incident occurred when she and Charles first arrived in Townsville:

In the afternoon I saw an interesting figure in a flowing white dress sailing along the wet sands. I watched, curious to see who it could be out at that time of the day without even an umbrella. As she came nearer I saw that it was a gin arrayed in thin white muslin marching along with a queenly air, her head thrown back, a long yam stick in her hand, her dress blowing out in a long train, her slender black figure showing through.

Fig. 5 Lucy Gray’s drawing of an Aboriginal woman on the beach at Townsville (Gray, ‘Journal’, p.11).

In the drawing, Lucy has taken advantage of her training in watercolours to smudge and wash the ink into a nice imitation of fluid reflections. The well-executed lines depicting a flowing garment and a proud queenly stance are accentuated by the profile view that has been chosen. There is a suggestion here of the ‘noble savage’ concept that still prevailed to some extent in Britain, and had been promoted by French writers such as Jean Jacques Rousseau, keen to encourage the concept of the supposedly idyllic life of ‘men of nature’. However, the face of Lucy’s ‘native’ woman has a distinctly African appearance, suggesting the artist had not yet become sufficiently familiar with Australian Aboriginal features at close range to be able to produce a reasonable likeness, depending instead upon remembered images of African ‘natives’.
In the mid-eighteen hundreds, when Lucy was in England, celebrated artists, such as sculptor Pietro Calvi, and painters like Gabriel Rossetti, James Whistler and John Lewis, were welcoming the opportunity black figures provided as a contrast to traditional representations of white Europeans. Artists like Lewis were beginning to travel to closer colonies such as Africa, thus enabling them to define, at first hand, racial peculiarities through their art. Moreover, the abolitionist and missionary movements played a large part in bringing the racial features of the African people to the attention of the British public during the nineteenth century. Kathryn Castle notes that ‘by the mid-Victorian era children were seeing images of the African in advertising, in popular entertainments and, if one lived in a seaport town, occasionally in the flesh’. Freed slaves were also becoming a common sight in England around the middle of the century, especially in the major trading ports. Spending time between London, Dorking, Belgium and Brighton in the late 1850s and the 1860s, Lucy must have had numerous opportunities to observe and even sketch and paint African people, either in the flesh, or from illustrations and photographs. She was, however, less likely to have seen realistic images of Australian Aborigines. In any case, even prominent colonial artists such as Joseph Conrads, John Glover, Joseph Lycett, John Skinner, Eugene von Guérard and Philip King struggled to adequately represent the Australian landscape and the physiognomy of indigenous Australians.

Lucy attempted again to describe and draw an Aboriginal woman after she was settled in their new house at Glendower:

We saw there such a funny little black baby. The mother who for the time was shepherdess came up to the station with her flock at sundown. She was dressed in a short cotton shirt [and] carried her baby slung over her shoulders, strapped up in a piece of bark. We asked her to show us her piccaninny. She took it off her shoulder, laid it on a large stone, [and] without any other reply began to undo the fastenings. Inside the bark which made the cradle there was a piece of opossum skin, the fur side next to the baby. In this it was covered completely & bound with strips of bark head and feet without other clothes – it seemed to like it for it began to cry immediately she uncovered it.

Lucy gives details of the domestic arrangements of Aboriginal mothers, obliged to carry their babies for long periods over rough bush country – details not usually found in male discourse. Not only does she provide a good description of the bark cradle and the wrapping of the baby, she also humanises the account by mentioning that the baby was crying.

In Fig. 6, Lucy has attempted two drawings of the event. Now, any suggestion of the idealised noble savage has all but disappeared, as the artist begins to come to terms with the complexities of racial difference. However, in the first drawing the artist has had trouble with the young woman’s legs, which are too thick and heavy. This suggests, still, a lack of understanding of the general physiognomy of the Aboriginal people of north Queensland who tend, even today, to be tall and slim. There is also a stiffness that is at odds with the loose-limbed movement one associates with a young woman accustomed to walking long distances. The second picture is an improvement, and demonstrates the artist’s increased awareness of the girl’s stance and general appearance. The legs are longer and thinner, and there is a sense of lightness and supple movement that indicates the artist is now gaining a better understanding of her subject. However, the facial features in both pictures are still slightly African, suggesting a failure to separate herself entirely from popular images of the past.

Although these two drawings do not succeed entirely as recognisable images of Australian Aboriginality I suggest they, along with the drawing of the woman on the beach, have significance in an historical and cultural sense. They demonstrate how a particular Victorian middle-class woman was prepared to make a concerted effort to better understand the behaviour and appearance of people whose culture and appearance were very different from anything with which she was familiar. This works alongside a growing understanding of the colonial situation as a whole, together with her personal growth as a woman. The processes are translated through written and pictorial texts destined for an immediate readership. Today, the texts are of benefit because they reveal multi-layered facets of early encounters, and introduce evocative demonstrations of evolving familiarity with what was
once an alien environment. Anthropologists, social historians, and scholars interested in women’s history and cultural interaction, would find the above representations of special interest.

Dale Spender has emphasised the ‘explanatory’ nature of much women’s writing from the colonies. This, she says, is because women writers in their gendered capacity as nurturers and carers were more conscious that their audience in Britain would require detailed background information about a colonial situation that was unfamiliar to them. Such detail, which includes careful descriptions of relationships and spatial activities often thought by men to be somewhat trivial and not worthy of reporting, can provide a wealth of information for historians today, as they search for ways in which to explore, and come to terms with, colonial situations and colonial action. In spite of earlier tensions with her mother, Lucy’s deep affinity with her fatherless family seemed to make her even more conscious of their feelings and anxieties, thus encouraging her to describe matters in greater detail.

Fig. 6 Two attempts by Lucy to draw the young Aboriginal shepherdess. Note the sheep hurrying through the gateway in a cloud of dust.

This is particularly true of matters pertaining to domesticity. The property Glendower had no buildings at first, apart from rough shelters in which workmen lived, in one of which Lucy and Charles lived until a better home was built. Lucy’s description of the interior of that first dwelling includes sensory perceptions that draw the reader into the experience.

The hut was made entirely of thatch with an opening in one gable for a window, at the other for a door which did not exist. At either side were berths (or ‘bunks’ as they call them) very roughly made [and] very high, which served for sofas, seats & beds, with some grass [and] hide for a mattress. The table was a section of a large tree. All round were hung stock whips, bridles, rifles, revolvers, etc, without any attempt at order.

The description is enhanced by a drawing (see Fig. 7).

Readers who have had experience of old saddle rooms and feed sheds in outback Australia can easily relate to the realism of Lucy’s description of this stockman’s hut. However, even to those who have not experienced such things, Lucy’s writing, together with the sketch, is effective in involving the reader in a sensory and imaginative experience that goes beyond that found in much contemporary male discourse. Because of a wish to accommodate her immediate readers, she has provided readers today with some idea of how it actually felt to live on the colonial ‘frontier’.

Finally their new house is finished. Lucy writes:

Since I wrote last we have established ourselves in our new house, or hut as [Robert] calls it. I daresay many huts are more better in many ways, but this although very rough [and] of the most primitive construction is not what I should call a hut. I think because it has wide verandahs [and]
is a long strip of building instead of the compact structure one expects to see when one hears of a hut. It consists of three rooms in a row all opening into the verandah before and behind which answer for halls [and] passages & for windows as the – between the top of the walls [and] the roof there [is] about 2 feet open which has the advantage of letting in plenty of air [and] the disadvantage of making it impossible to shut out cats, etc. The partitions between the rooms being the same height as the walls leaves the whole length of roof open from end to end [so] that a person at one end has the benefit of conversation going on at the other. Wooden shutters shut out the light or let it in as you may dispose of them. Such things as glazed windows being unknown in these parts. The walls are made of thick slabs of wood placed up [and] down [and] kept in place by thick horizontal beams called “wall plates” … all of a comfortable reddish brown but quite rough. Simply adzed. The chimneys like the rest are wood [and] wide enough to leave standing room on the hearths when there is a large fire.50

Through her writing and drawing Lucy provides vivid representations of the two Queensland dwellings, demonstrating how dramatically different they were, not only from each other, but from the comfortable homes to which she had been accustomed, although she never complains about her circumstances. Instead, we catch a glimpse of Lucy’s wry sense of humour as she hints at the lack of privacy in the old homesteads. Well aware of her family’s difficulty in imagining colonial life, Lucy describes both the inside and the outside of the buildings, giving detail which is, as Spender says, a special characteristic of women’s writing. This kind of detail is often overlooked in traditional source material, and in subsequent historical discourse.

An understanding of the needs of a close family awaiting news back ‘home’, an intellectually stimulating background centred around popular science, together with a ‘ladies’ education that focussed on literature and visual art, not only inform but enable Lucy Gray’s written and pictorial texts. Her depictions of first encounters, and an evolving understanding and acceptance of cultural difference, come with a freshness that is lacking in the texts of many men, and lacking too in the writings of many native-born colonial woman. Lucy’s textual representations, including her spiritual connotations of the natural environment, are driven by an enquiring mind, a familiarity with current literature, and an acceptance of difference enhanced by past experience. While anticipated audience
and Victorian ideals still shaped the production of her texts, her formative years, in many ways unusual, were instrumental in determining various discursive directions and in dictating ways in which cultural, social and scientific beliefs were negotiated and articulated. I argue that the multi-layered facets inherent in texts by women like Lucy Gray, and the formative years behind the production of those texts, deserve closer attention if we are to better understand the behaviour and attitudes of the British in colonial situations.

Notes

2The originals of these documents are held in the John Oxley Section of the State Library, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia. They are referenced as the Lucy Grey Papers (JOL OM75–123). Page numbering used here is in accordance with the erratic numbering in various sections of the journal. In the case of the diary, pages are not numbered at all and are referenced simply by date.
4See also Margaret Vivers, ‘Female Perspectives: A Study of the Colonial Texts of Adelaide Bowler and Lucy Gray’, PhD Thesis, University of New England, Armidale. In this, I wish to acknowledge the advice given by my supervisors Dr Catherine Waters, Dr David Andrew Roberts, Dr David Kent and Associate Professor Michael Sharkey. I also thank Professor Alan Atkinson for his encouragement and support.
5For example, see correspondence from Charles Gray to Lucy Gray, 5 August 1870, Lucy Gray Papers (JOL OM75–123), in which more explicit details of retaliations are given.
7Information from Birr Castle Archives; also from the staff of Offaly Historical and Archaeological Society, Birr Baptismal Records; 1821 Ballybritt Census for Birr and Surrounding Areas; Griffiths Valuation, Offaly Traders Index 1824–1908; The Leinster Express 1831–1851. Details also from Dublin Valuation Office, Dublin; and Memorial to John Waters, Church of Ireland, Birr.
16An untitled document in the possession of Margaret Hogan of Birr states that there were fifteen private schools in the town in 1836 (no pages numbers indicated).
18Rate book information supplied by National Archives of Ireland, Dublin, Ireland.
19Early hostility towards her mother is revealed in subtle ways in correspondence held with the Williams/Gray Papers, in the Tairawhiti Museum, Gisborne, New Zealand. However, as a married woman a new understanding developed between the two women.
21England Census 1861, details provided by Brighton History Centre, Brighton, England. Information concerning income and family assistance taken from correspondence held in the Tairawhiti Museum. The author visited Dorking in 2006 to find Holmwood Cottage and the Brighton residence still standing and in good repair.
22Monica Anderson, Women and the Politics of Travel, 1870–1914, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Cranbury, New Jersey, 2006, in particular p.19. For a letter commenting on Miss Rye’s plan to assist middle-class women to emigrate, but suggesting more ‘servant class’ women should be sent, see Judith Johnston and Monica Anderson, Australia Imagined: Views from the British Press 1800–1900, University of Western Australian Press, Crawley, 2005, pp.102–104.
24 For details of this scheme and the kind of women who were encouraged to emigrate, see A. James Hammerton, *Emigrant Gentlewomen: Genteel Poverty and Female Emigration, 1830-1914*, Croom Helm, London. Hammerton details the excess in England and Wales in 1861 of 209,663 women, of ‘the most marriageable ages between 20 and 30’, pp.28-32. See also Marion Diamond, *Emigration and Empire: The Life of Maria S. Rye*, Garland Publishing Company, New York and London, 1999, in particular pp.93-134, which cover the New Zealand experience, and in which ‘Miss Waters’ is mentioned.
25 Marriage certificate, Brighton and Hove Register Office, Brighton; Williams/Gray family papers.
31 South Sea Islanders, or ‘Kanakas’, were brought to Australia from the Pacific Islands in an attempt to alleviate the shortage of labour. Being dark-skinned they were thought to be more suitable for work in the heat of north Queensland, and were treated little better than slaves by many employers, in particular when employed in the sugar industry in the coastal regions. However, there is no evidence to indicate that the Grays treated their employees as slaves, in fact to the contrary.
32 Gray, ‘Journal’, p.XV.
36 As I said, Lucy may have thought the Australian indigenous children fortunate when compared with the starving children she had seen in Ireland. These children at least had food to eat and a roof over their heads.
39 Ibid., 5 June, 1870.
47 These pictures were filed as fragments with the journal.
49 Gray, ‘Journal’, pp.XXII-XXIII.
50 Gray, ‘Journal’, pp.XXI-XXXII.