

Jill Cowley

# Sisters Across the Ocean

## Observations on Women in Cultural Heritage in Australia

**W**omen in Australia and the United States share experiences, feelings, and hopes, and our histories have much in common. Women's experiences in Australia have a different texture, due to a combination of factors including Australia's close relationship to Asia, membership in the British Commonwealth, and interactions with Australia's unique natural environment. Aboriginal women struggled with their European invaders; and European women struggled with settling in a new country under harsh conditions. In Australia there are many on-going efforts to have women's voices heard in political and cultural arenas, including work toward equal and accurate representation of women's history and experience in heritage conservation (historic preservation).

In this paper, I offer a sampling of Australian approaches and activities relevant to women's heritage. This sampling is neither comprehensive nor representative; rather, it is based on research completed during my stay as a visiting lecturer at Charles Sturt University. While I mention the experiences and issues of aboriginal women, I refer readers to aboriginal women writers for first hand accounts of their experiences and views (e.g., D. Deacon, S. Morgan, L. Thompson).

*Pioneer Women's Hut, Tumberumba, New South Wales. Photo courtesy the author.*



*Women in Australian Cultural Heritage*  
As in the U.S., women in Australia have been involved in the range of cultural life and in activities that responded to and modified the landscape. Recent ethnographic research is showing that aboriginal women play a major role in spiritual life—both ceremony and land management—contrary to years of research where only aboriginal men were interviewed and where it was assumed that women did not play an active role (Brock 1989). Thought for many years to be prostitutes only, women shipped to Australia as convicts both contributed to the labor force in early colonial days and, as ex-convict, free women, played active and independent roles in farming, community development, and industry (Robinson 1994). Many women, like Annie Bryce of Wonnangatta Station in the Australian Alps, ran pastoral stations for years after their husbands died (Domicelj & Marshall 1994). Women immigrating to Australia from China and other Asian countries provided community services in Sydney and other urban areas while enduring discrimination from white Australians (Yen 1994).

For a number of years, writers, academics and institution builders in Australia have been concerned with correcting the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of women's role in Australian history, and with adding the women's perspective at existing historic sites and protected areas. Some are also concerned with finding out what places are significant to women and why, and being able to articulate women's experiences and places through women's eyes and using women's voices.

Individual women in Australia have had significant impacts on the environment, and their contributions and their places have been the subject of recent research and some preservation attention. For instance, Elizabeth MacQuarie, whose husband was governor of the new colony,

landscaped the grounds of Sydney Government House and the Female Orphan School (Bickford 1992). Quoting from Sagazio, Edna Walling, “one of Australia’s most influential garden designers and conservationists... (was) one of the first Australian gardeners to appreciate the aesthetic and practical qualities of native plants” (Sagazio 1989). Distinctly women’s places include the Cascades Female Factory in Tasmania—the women’s equivalent of Port Arthur men’s convict prison—which was entered in the Register of the National Estate in 1978 (Australian Heritage Commission n.d.), and which is now open to the public with interpretive programs in place (du Cros 1997).

Individual names and accurate histories are being added to the stories of women who historically have been remembered only generically, as the capable “bush mum” or self-sacrificing wives (Anderson 1993). Significant women researchers, such as anthropologist Olive Pink, are being brought out of obscurity and their reputations changed from women of quaint eccentricity to women who have made valid and significant contributions (Marcus 1991). Women anthropologists working with Aboriginal communities have started to correct research gender biases by bringing to light Aboriginal women’s integral roles in Aboriginal ceremonial culture and land management (Brock 1989). In deconstructions of the interpretation of archeological research, Chabot, Jones and Pay and others have exposed how contemporary gender biases can be imposed on interpretations of the past (Chabot 1991; Jones & Pay 1990). For example, because 19th- and 20th-century assumptions about gender put women in domestic and more passive roles, some interpretations of archeological research have not considered the possibility of women as hunters and warriors, even though there was no evidence to the contrary (Chabot 1991). The Pioneer Women’s Hut in Tumbarumba, New South Wales, was established in the mid-1980s specifically to develop and house a collection of artifacts and documents which make visible the lives of European settler women. And the Fourth Women in Archaeology Conference, held in northern Queensland in 1997, focused on moving beyond the identification of the problem to development of an action plan (Comber 1996).

Correcting under representation and misrepresentation is not only a matter of making women visible, but also of shifting focus from

product to process. In Australian European history, men have more often been in a position of control over landscape modification and place-making. Because traditional European heritage conservation efforts focus on material evidence (tools, structures, engineered features, and large-scale land modifications), these efforts tend to focus on the actions and products of men. The need to shift focus from large to small scale and from product to process is discussed by those concerned with including and accurately representing women’s contributions. Given that European women, overall, have been more involved in the processes of making families and communities rather than making large-scale places (Johnston 1991), putting more emphasis on non-material culture and cultural processes, and blending knowledge of social relationships with knowledge of tangible resources, can bring women’s contributions to light.

#### *Perspectives on Historic Themes*

Historic themes in both countries have recently undergone revision, and in both cases, previous emphasis on politics, economics, and technology and on individuals have given way to a more holistic approach, where social history, vernacular trends, and areas in which women have traditionally been more involved (domestic life, unpaid work, volunteer organizations) are now formally recognized. Interestingly, while the U.S. national park system places family, community, and life cycle topics within the “Peopling Places” theme (U.S.D.I. NPS 1996), where they can be overshadowed by discussions of population migrations, the Australian system has a separate category for “Marking phases of life” (Australian Heritage Commission 1995).

Studies addressing women’s heritage also include discussions on historic themes, for example, Miranda Morris’ *Placing Women: A Methodology for the Identification, Interpretation and Promotion of the Heritage of Women in Tasmania* (Morris 1997), funded by the Australian Commonwealth National Estates Grants Programme. In her section on themes, Morris offers an alternative framework which focuses on “women’s life enhancing contributions in the free economy ... divided ... into 14 categories: giving birth, producing food, providing shelter, clothing, keeping well, raising children, sharing knowledge, expressing imagination, forming relationships, creating communities, keeping in touch, exchanging, dealing with

death, nourishing the spirit” (Morris 1997). This framework recognizes unpaid work, and emphasizes the sustainability of human activity.

*Deconstructing Language Patterns*

In her 1989 book, *Women and the Bush: Forces of Desire in the Australian Cultural Tradition*, Kay Schaffer takes a detailed look at the Aussie bushman character, how this character has been embedded in networks of meaning, how this character has developed in opposition to the land which is characterized as female, and how these characterizations have influenced attitudes toward the land and land management. All quotes in this section are from Schaffer 1989.

Schaffer shows us how “... the Australian tradition involves a struggle for a national identity against the otherness of the bush” (136). “Bush” refers to rural, outback, and wild places. The tough, anti-authoritarian, white, male bushman battling for survival against the bush has long been equated with Australian national identity in folklore, literature, politics, and daily life. The bushman is the “native son” who struggles to develop an identity separate from the English parent culture. Sometimes merged into the native son identity along with the bushman are the “digger” (gold-seekers in the 1850s goldrush) and Australian soldiers. Rich landholders or urban men have often been excluded, and women, Aboriginal women and men, and Chinese and other immigrants have almost always been excluded.

Quoting Schaffer, “The landscape provides a feminine other against which the bushman-as-hero is constructed.” (52). The native son establishes his identity in opposition to the land, which is characterized as female. “She” is alternately experienced by the native son as seductive (through her natural beauty) and threatening (with her fires, floods, and expanses of isolated spaces), and ultimately as the “cruel mother” when she is perceived to deny nurturance and present obstacles to man’s efforts to control the land and natural forces. Schaffer quotes Miriam Dixson, “Australia is like the body of an unloved woman.” (51). So, the bush is both “No Place for a Woman” and is characterized as female (62). These language patterns have influenced attitudes toward the Australian environment and its management to a large degree.

Schaffer’s deconstruction shows the native-son-against-cruel-mother-land tradition as a European projection that has become imbedded in discourses on national identity and which

influences behavior. Her deconstruction challenges the transference of this projection onto real women and their role in Australia’s history. Additionally, Schaffer’s deconstruction allows the space and clarity of vision for women’s history to be viewed more accurately.

*Future Directions*

While the bushman-as-hero has been, and still is to a large degree, the accepted Australian ideal character (Hollywood’s Crocodile Dundee is a recent if somewhat modified version), this association is being challenged on many fronts. Writers like Schaffer, those involved in civil rights movements, womens’ and mens’ movements, Aboriginal speakers and writers, and those researching the contributions of immigrants are all gradually replacing the traditional characterization with a more pluralistic, inclusive and environmentally sustainable one. Australian indigenous relationships with country and traditional land management practices are increasingly being researched and used as models for the management of government land (D.E.S.T. 1996). These efforts may change the land from being characterized as “the body of an unloved woman” to being a place that is cared for by both women and men. Women and men in Australia and the U.S. can work together in the cultural heritage field to make research and interpretation more accurate and inclusive, not just with respect to women, but with respect to all communities who have been marginalized in traditional approaches.

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