

FINDING ELIZA

*Power and
Colonial
Storytelling*

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Methods and Motives



THE SAND GLOWS pink on Fraser Island as the sun sets on the beaches that face the Queensland mainland. The light is romantic and it is easy to see why people honeymoon here. I find the wilder, eastern side of the island – particularly around Orchid Beach, where Eliza and her fellow shipwreck survivors landed – more spectacular, but here on the western side there is a welcoming calm.

Relaxing and taking in the changing light after a day of swimming, fishing and four-wheel-driving, one would think this land a paradise born of another world. But it is not so hard to imagine that this natural wonderland could seem like a hell on earth to Eliza. In a landscape so foreign to her, she'd be uncertain as to whether she would make it back to her own kind, and bewildered by the strange ways of the Aboriginal people. It is easy to understand her fear.

Eliza's story is a simple one: a woman is shipwrecked, her husband dies and she must survive among a 'primitive' tribe in order to find her way back to civilisation – and to safety – or at least survive long enough to be rescued. In

order for this simple story to work as a gripping tale, however, several elements need to be in place. Eliza has to be very good; the Aboriginal people have to be very bad. They need to be barbaric and violent – indeed, they are portrayed as cannibals – to increase the danger that Eliza is in, to heighten the drama. The story isn't as compelling if Eliza finds herself among friendly natives or kind Aboriginals. Where is the suspense in that? And where is the thrill or heroics in rescuing Eliza if she isn't really in any danger? No-one would pay to see that movie.

*... where is the thrill or
heroics in rescuing Eliza if
she isn't really in any danger?*

Each step taken to enhance these dramatic elements of the story is a step away from the reality of what actually happened. Breaking the elements down gives an understanding of how the story is told to achieve the most dramatic effect. And, when *how* the story is told is clear, investigating *why* it is told becomes easier.

ELIZA: THE PURE AND GOOD

I think of the portrait of Eliza Fraser with the shawl modestly wrapped around her shoulders as I read descriptions of her in the various accounts of her story.

Eliza is a virtuous, moral woman from a middle-class background but the story, especially as told by others, treats her as a symbol of something more. She becomes the embodiment of all that is right and proper about the Empire; she is the epitome of Britannia. Eliza's capture is a metaphor for the danger that 'non-whites' pose to white society, especially in the untamed colonies. This concept of the British Empire could only be projected onto the most moral of women. Convict or working-class women, for example, could never embody this image in the same way. In Eliza's case, her vulnerability, innocence and chastity are highlighted, and her reputation is defended when insinuations of fraud arise.

Sarah Carter, in her book *Capturing Women*, explains how white women were portrayed in colonial literature as objects of purity, symbols of domesticity, and that they were viewed as the moral standard-bearers of their race – and class – with a duty to exert moral influence, as wives and mothers, over men. This moral pedestal is the kind described by philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *Émile* when he writes that 'public opinion is the tomb of a man's virtue and the throne of a woman's' and that women's honour 'does not rest on their conduct but on their reputation'.

But Eliza's pedestal is also a gilded cage. Her story is taken and told by male narrators like John Curtis, and in their hands she becomes a valuable but defenceless object to be rescued in a heroic tale. Eliza and her purity, modesty and virtue become the prize in a boys'-own-adventure

version of her rescue. On the colonial frontier, where there are few white women, Eliza is precious, exotic and rare.

While Eliza's story may elevate the white woman as a symbol, it is also a way of subordinating Eliza herself as a person. It is this characterisation of vulnerability and innocence of women that kept them in the home, under the control and supervision of fathers and husbands who claimed that women needed protection and lacked the capacity for independence. Under nineteenth-century British law, women were chattels of their husbands, unable to vote and prevented from owning and inheriting property.

To make Eliza appear purer and more chaste, more genteel, more civilised, her virtues are contrasted against the character of the natives, who are depicted as being menacing and dangerous, savage and cannibalistic. They are not merely different from her; they are a threat to her.

Of course, the real Eliza must have been far from a helpless damsel in distress. She has a tenacious will to survive and makes it safely home when many of her male companions perish. And indeed, as Eliza discovers, public sympathy for her evaporates once people learn that she has remarried and now, with her new husband, has a new protector. No wonder she keeps her marriage secret.

ABORIGINAL PEOPLE: BASE AND BRUTAL

Throughout the Eliza Fraser narratives, the superiority of whites is asserted. In his descriptions of Aboriginal people, John Curtis refers to their animalistic traits and their

lowly status on the evolutionary ladder. Here are selected samples of his opinions that these days many people would find very offensive:

This was certainly a prudent precaution, but they afterwards learned that it was a useless one, for such is the sensitiveness of the olfactory nerve of these barbarians, that they can scent the progress of Europeans as well as their quadruped brethren, the bloodhounds ...

Many of both sexes, when young, are far from ugly; nay, some of them are tolerably handsome, but the old women are absolute frights, and appear only to want an additional member to render them analogous with the long-tailed fraternity ...

Having no impelling motive to the performance of a good action, and nothing to deter them from a bad one, no wonder that they are sunk so low in the thermometer, and almost to the very zero, of civilization ...

It would really seem that these untutored brutes had been well instructed in the art of teasing; and they strongly remind us of the pranks of a domestic animal of the feline species, who delights in torturing her helpless victims before she devours them ...

These demons in human form employed every method which they could devise, to torture and annoy their miserable captives.

By portraying white people as superior, good and civilised, and blacks as inferior, bad and uncivilised, most versions of Eliza's story set up a clear 'us' and 'them' dichotomy. The differences between the two races run deep – as distinct as night and day, black and white.

To further emphasise the superiority of the 'civilised' whites, and the savagery of the blacks, the latter's purported barbaric practices are also highlighted. In the 1937 publication *John Graham, Convict, 1824*, a fictionalised account of Graham's rescue story, author and artist Robert Gibbins provides the following description of Aboriginal people dancing:

With their feet far apart and every muscle of their legs twitching so that the whole body seemed to tremble they would dance back-to-back, suddenly twisting about and facing each other, then as suddenly turning again and continuing their wild orgy of quivering flesh.

Such descriptions of these 'barbaric practices' reinforced notions of the inherently savage nature of the people themselves, while little was done to clarify the observations made by Eliza Fraser about Aboriginal culture. Eliza's accounts are full of claims of savagery and bloodlust to an

extent that seems incredible. Curtis provides many examples in his text:

In common with all savages, revenge with them is never satiated till quenched in the blood of an adversary. Like the Chinese, they are not particular about the person; but if a white injures or offends them, they generally satisfy their rage upon the first of that colour they can conveniently meet with. In their wild state they know not what it is either to forget or forgive; and when once they murder a white, always expect retaliation for it, whatever appearance of friendship the other whites may put on, believing that they are yet to suffer, and that only fear or the want of an opportunity prevents a reprisal; hence, until some of the tribe are killed by whites, they never consider themselves safe, and they usually continue their murderings until, in retaliation, blood is expiated in blood.

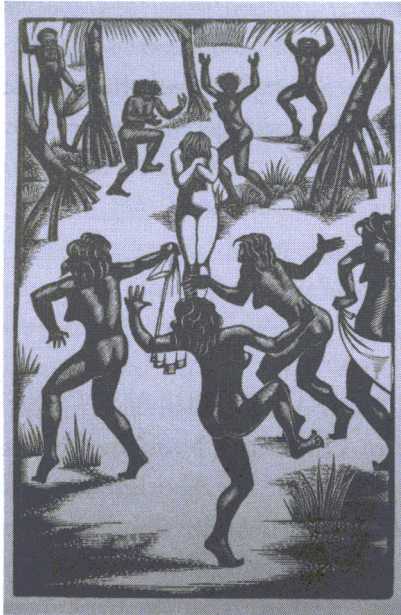
ABORIGINAL MEN: LECHEROUS AND DANGEROUS

A front plate in Gibbings's book starkly illustrates this aspect of the narrative. As Aboriginal women dance, a white figure hides her face in shame, her arms used to hide her modestly, in contrast to the nakedness that the Aboriginal women revel in. In the background, an older Aboriginal man looms, leering at Eliza. The white woman's sexuality is seen as being lecherously desired

and prized by Aboriginal men. Gibbings describes it this way:

But even in primitive society the exotic has its charm, and many a night as she lay under her covering of bark, dark forms would slink around and lusting faces would try to lure her from the camp.

Eliza's sexual peril is the titillating undercurrent in her story and an important source of dramatic tension.



Frontispiece woodcut by Robert Gibbings in his book *John Graham, Convict, 1824*. (Courtesy of the Estate of Robert Gibbings and the Heather Chalcraft Literary Agency)

Although Eliza does not meet the ‘fate worse than death’ during her ‘captivity’, in her story the danger is always there, lurking at every turn. Her situation taps into broader fears that were prevalent at the time of her ordeal. The threat of miscegenation, of diluting the purity of the white race, especially by black men, was always feared. Eliza’s predicament is a situation ripe with that danger, as personified in a libidinous black man.

Captivity narratives like Eliza’s often allude to the mistreatment of Aboriginal women within their own communities; they are referred to as ‘beasts of burden’ and other descriptions that imply a subordinate and subservient position to Aboriginal men. Such narratives work to further exaggerate the savagery of the Aboriginal men. This demonising of Aboriginal men is generally done without any irony or reflection on the subordinate and subservient place of women in European society at the time.

Patrick White’s novel *A Fringe of Leaves* was inspired by Eliza Fraser’s story but in several ways digresses from the classic captivity narrative. White can always be relied on to explore the complexities and hypocrisy inherent in a society’s class system. In the case of this novel he investigates these themes through a working-class heroine elevated in social status by marriage. This allows him to cleverly compare the drudgery faced by women from England’s working and poorer classes with the labour required of women in a hunter-gatherer society.

ABORIGINAL WOMEN: MEAN AND JEALOUS

Just as white women reflect the moral standards of their community in frontier stories, Aboriginal women play the same role for theirs. With this role as standard-bearer for their race, it is not surprising that Aboriginal women in these tales are never portrayed as morally good. Instead, they are used as symbols of the degeneracy and savagery attributed to their race by white authors. While white femininity is equated with virtue, domestication and positive moral influences, Aboriginal women are portrayed as the antithesis of idealised womanhood.

In Eliza's tale, Aboriginal women are described as even more treacherous than black men. They are portrayed as being pettier and meaner, and having less sympathy for Eliza's plight than the men do. They are made to seem physically threatening and dangerous, without domestic skill or maternal instinct.



Sidney Nolan

Mrs Fraser 1947

Ripolin enamel on hardboard

66.2 x 107 cm

Purchased 1995 with a special allocation from the Queensland Government. Celebrating the Queensland Art Gallery's Centenary 1895–1995

Collection: Queensland Art Gallery

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Sidney Nolan became intrigued with the story of Eliza Fraser when he visited Fraser Island. He was particularly fascinated by the version of the story in which Eliza, while living among the Aboriginal people, becomes romantically involved with the escaped convict David Bracefell, whom she betrays upon her rescue. There seems to be something intriguing about the notion that, in the natural environment, all the trappings and confines of class and culture can be stripped away and what we are left with is our most primal, natural and instinctive self. It is this concept that Nolan captures in the portrait that he commenced work on during his stay on the island. The end result highlights Eliza's desperation and degradation, but it also melds her into the landscape.



It is impossible to know all the facts about Eliza Fraser's circumstances. They have been lost long ago and even the personal testimonies of survivors and Eliza herself are steeped in contradictions about what actually happened. But in some ways the facts are not the most interesting thing about Eliza's story and its iconic place in Australian folklore.

This woman's story might have been a simple one, but it would come to be used for many complex purposes – well beyond anything that Eliza herself might have imagined. Eliza had her own motivations for the embellishment of her experiences. But there are other reasons why the story has been told the way it has, factors enhancing its appeal and serving specific purposes. The tale of civilisation versus savagery, of white against black, of 'us' and 'them' reveals much about the prevailing values and ideologies of Eliza's time.

GAINING MONEY OR PARDON

Eliza Fraser was no doubt traumatised by her experience but upon rescue she began to exaggerate her tale. By the time she arrived back in Sydney what happened to her was already being sensationalised in the newspapers. Reports of Eliza's story began to differ from her original account. This continued in London, where pecuniary reward encouraged her emphasis on savagery, cruelty and



Like the text within, the frontispiece to *Narrative of the Capture, Sufferings, and Miraculous Escape of Mrs. Eliza Fraser* likens the Butchulla people to Native Americans. (Artist unknown. Courtesy of the National Library of Australia)

torture. The more sympathy she could garner, the more donations she received.

Accounts of Eliza's captivity were also altered, often dramatically, depending on the intended readership. In North America, stories about the capture of white women by Indians had become a lucrative business, and Eliza tailored her tale accordingly. This commercial agenda can be seen in the terminology she uses: 'chiefs', 'wigwams' and 'squaws' are referred to in some versions of the story.

Eliza would go on to demonise the 'natives' and exaggerate their savagery, peddling her story for her own advantage. But, although this was a cruel thing to do to

the Aboriginal people who had ensured her survival, I don't judge her for this approach. We don't know much about her circumstances once she returned to London, and she may well have had to be enterprising to ensure her own economic security – as well as that of her children. Women in her time didn't often have a lot of choices. And I don't criticise her for being entrepreneurial if that was the case. Eliza's resilience in the strange environs of Fraser Island shows that she was a resourceful woman, a survivor.

But Eliza was not the only person who told her story and nor was she the only one who had something to gain from its embellishment.

John Graham's pardon rested on his bravery in rescuing Eliza. This was his inducement for exaggerating the danger that she was in and, in turn, the barbarity of the Aboriginal people she was supposedly held captive by. His own account is reproduced in Michael Alexander's book:

That John Graham here was forced to venture every thing by himselfe not only to Save the lives of the unhappy people they had carried away ... That on The 7th of August 1836, he freed Mrs. Fraser from seven hundred Canniballs and savages ... he succeeded to take her from thoes frightful Clans – and hoards of Canniballs and savages and carried her upwards of 40 miles with the assistance of 4 blacks that came with him from the mountains ... and thus by himselfe risqued all and freed all ... That his Superior knowledge of the country and

Language kept them all from harm and even the Savage from being killed after all Thoes promises I am still detained and after venturing my life to save and face the waves in open boats after Delivering four Christians from the Canniballs and savage what no other person would do I hope to be rewarded.

Graham had, by this time, lived with the Aboriginal people throughout the area for many years, preferring their company and culture to that of his own people who had settled in Moreton Bay. It was his knowledge of their culture and his relationship with them that assisted him in locating Eliza. He would have known that they were not cannibals. He would have understood the dynamics of their community. But this would not have served the purpose of creating a narrative where he was instrumental in rescuing Eliza from peril, especially the expected 'fate worse than death'. Graham was after a pardon, and a story of friendly natives in which Eliza is cared for – even if she had trouble fitting in – would not have created the heroism needed to secure his long-desired goal. Graham's tactics worked. He was eventually granted a ticket-of-leave and £10 for his efforts.

SAVING SOULS AND CIVILISING SAVAGERY

In some accounts it is not the Aboriginals of Fraser Island who save Eliza from the shipwreck but God who saves her from the natives. And it is her unwavering belief in

Him and His teaching that leads to Eliza's survival and safe return to civilisation. Curtis writes:

We ardently hope that all those who have been especial objects of favour in the sight of Heaven, so as to escape from their enemies by miracle, will ever evince their gratitude to Him who hath brought them out of 'the valley of the shadow of death' – and they can only do so by keeping his commandments.

Given the predominant role that religion played in European culture at the time, Eliza Fraser's faith was not unusual. Curtis's version highlights the way in which Eliza's deliverance from the savages was used to reinforce religious beliefs, particularly as an example of how faith can assist in overcoming adversity and fear.

... it would be better to implore the forgiveness of God, and resign themselves quietly to their fate. What an awful moment of terror and dismay! – but their resolution was a wise one, for it is much safer to fall into the 'hands of God, than the hands of wicked and cruel men' ...

Our history exhibits not only a detail of the barbarity of the heathen, but also the benevolence of the Christian; and moreover the splendid liberality of a generous public ...

Eliza herself strikes this same chord:

... she unceasingly looked to and called upon Heaven for that help which it appeared not then in the power of any human being alone to afford her; and to be thus so suddenly and unexpectedly rescued from the power of one who was about to plunge her into a state of inconceivable wretchedness, must be admitted as proof positive that in whatever situation we may be placed, however forlorn and apparently hopeless our condition, we still have a friend, whom, if in Him we put our trust, we shall find both able and willing to stay the assassin's hand, even at the instant when raised to inflict the fatal blow!

Curtis uses the event as proof of the need to bring Christianity to the 'savages' and he makes the strongest call for missionary zeal in converting them:

Before we commence our interesting narrative, we cannot refrain from indulging the hope that the perusal will act as a stimulus to missionary exertions, and that the various societies who have long engaged in sending persons to preach the gospel to those who 'sit in darkness and in the shadow of death;' we trust that a holy emulation will arise among them, who shall be the first to send a missionary to the shore where the natives inflict these unheard tortures.

Yet another consequence of this story and its telling as a story of enlightenment over dark savagery is neatly summed up by Aboriginal historian Lynette Russell:

They wrote of an Australia populated with malicious violent savages whose salvation would be exchanged for access to the land.

This missionary agenda worked alongside the dispossession and control of Aboriginal people, and in his account of Eliza's tale Curtis contemplates the broader agenda for colonisation that occurred at the time of the *Stirling Castle's* shipwreck:

There appears to be a degree of force necessary to urge a man towards civilization in his primitive, debased state, and cause him to divest himself of the habits which he has acquired. It is only when the mind is more enlightened, and reason supersedes animal instinct, that civilization will speedily advance among the community, and this must be effected by the exertions of its individual members; nor can this be reasonably expected, without Divine interposition, to be the work of one generation ...

Persons who have had an opportunity of obtaining some knowledge of these savages, are of opinion that very many lives might be saved if timely and efficient means were adopted; for it has been observed that when the various tribes of Australia have been fairly

satisfied of their inferior power and strength to contest with the whites, they ever after show a disinclination for hostility.

The portrayal of Aboriginal people and their culture as savage does not only provide a clear justification of the Christianising mission. It also allows a broader narrative and purpose to play out. It is not just about saving Aboriginal souls; there is a desire to take their lands.

CAPTIVITY NARRATIVES AND THE FRONTIER

Images of white female vulnerability were exploited in nineteenth-century Australia to convey the necessity of policing Aboriginal communities. Sarah Carter makes this observation when considering how captivity narratives were used on the Canadian frontier:

It was important that white women were seen to be not only helpless but powerless, without a voice of their own, and to be the property of white men; thus, according to [sociologist Vron] Ware, 'their "protectors" could claim to be justified in taking revenge for any alleged insult or attack on them.'

This is precisely what happened with Eliza Fraser's story. Captivity narratives form a part of Australian frontier folklore, and they emerged at a time that has more significance than we might appreciate. The clear inferiority

of Aboriginal people and the barbarism of their culture as portrayed in a story like Eliza Fraser's was relied on to justify their dispossession and to ignore their connections to their traditional country, their own laws and their own systems of decision-making.

These stories of native barbarity and the threat that they posed may seem quaint today, but they were particularly important at moments on the frontier when tensions arose between coloniser and colonised. At these points of conflict, stories like Eliza's, when told in this way, provided the justification for force, violence and dominance, and were used to gain support for plans to eradicate, subdue, tame, contain and control Aboriginal people.

Historian Kay Schaffer has written extensively on Eliza Fraser. In her book *In the Wake of First Contact: The Eliza Fraser Stories*, she notes the link between the popularity of Eliza's story and frontier conflict in the era in which Eliza was shipwrecked and held 'captive'. She observes that the Queensland settlement wars of the 1850s brought the Aboriginal people and the 'invading populations of settlers into closer contact and provoked more overt violence and savagery'. Writer Veronica Brady (also an authority on Patrick White), in an essay titled 'A Properly Appointed Humanism? *A Fringe of Leaves* and the Aborigines', also makes the link between Eliza Fraser's story and the frontier violence that followed as active dispossession of the island took place during the decades after she was shipwrecked. According to Brady, the tale was the 'excuse for at least two large-scale

massacres of Aborigines in the nineteenth century’.

Eliza’s story is imbued with British fears and insecurities about both the frontier and Aboriginal people. As the extracts from Curtis’s book show, Eliza’s story became a platform from which to denigrate and dehumanise the ‘natives’, and create negative assumptions and stereotypes about Aboriginal people as being culturally and biologically inferior.

*Eliza’s story is imbued with
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Once these anxieties found expression and form in narratives such as Eliza’s, they justified the mechanisms for surveillance of Aboriginal people through policing practices, legal control and government policy. They allowed the law to overlook and sanction violence against the Indigenous population.

These narratives also allowed writers to transfer the violence of their own culture onto that of the Aborigines. They contain accounts of the brutish way of life of Aboriginal people but are curiously devoid of accounts of brutality within penal colonies or of violence against Aboriginal people. Eliza Fraser’s story says: ‘they’ are the barbarians, not ‘us’.