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My Mate Ellen:

cross-cultural friendship between women

in a 'pioneer memoir'

MINNIE BREWER, nee Hunter, (1853-1934) was well into her memoirs when she first introduced the Indigenous woman she had known, when she was a young woman living on a pastoral property in central western New South Wales in the 1870s. 'I forgot to mention how I met my little black mate Ellen', she wrote, as if suddenly realising her oversight:

Very early one morning I went into one of the rooms [of the house] where all sorts of odd things were huddled together on the floor I caught hold of a rooled [rolled] up mattress & out tumbled the tiniest human being I had ever seen, with a black curlie head. We nearly frightened each other to death, it was so unexpected & she poor thing had been sound asleep.

Ellen, and another woman, her sister Amelia, would make a number of further 'unexpected' appearances in Minnie Brewer's narrative, depicted with a refreshing individuality and, despite an undeniable element of racist paternalism, a sense of humanity that is often lacking in other colonial accounts of cross-cultural encounters. The episodes in which they appear are also closely tied to the landscape of the country that Minnie admired without reservation, particularly the river. In this respect Minnie Brewer's memoirs, and particularly her depiction of Ellen as her 'mate' and Amelia as her protector, provide a unique glimpse of the shared space of cross-cultural histories, and a sense of the possibilities and limitations for female friendships across the racial and social divide of colonial Australia.

Her memoirs demonstrate a number of pertinent themes that enlarge and revise previous understandings of frontier relations, and the genre of the pioneer narrative. Historians have concluded that friendships between settler and Indigenous women were rare, indeed a structural impossibility, given the extreme inequitable power relations and sexual rivalry between women on the frontiers of white settlement. But our attempt to understand the complexities of women's relationships are hampered by the thinness of sources; faced with scanty primary records we are forced to turn to the memoirs and other later writings of white pioneer women. Such sources are skewed to the privileged, and written as they were at the turn of the century against the backdrop of emerging women's rights, worked to affirm white women's contribution to nation-building rather than relationships of any kind of evenness with Indigenous women (who were, at the same time, being relegated to a 'melancholy footnote' in Australia's history). Hence the emergence of the 'goodfella missus legend' that portrayed white women as 'kind
mistresses' and Aboriginal women as 'objects of their maternal care.' But Minnie Brewer's memoirs, importantly, demonstrate that alternatives for cross-cultural relationships outside the confining 'mistress-maid' dyad did exist.

Furthermore, her recollections of colonial life highlight the competition between white women, showing the Australian colonial frontier space to be a crucible of female relationships of rivalry. They provide evidence too of the almost casual circulation of child-caring work between women on colonial frontiers. This context complicates simplistic notions of 'sexual jealousy' and reproductive competition as the explanation for discord between white and Indigenous women. Her writings demonstrate the existence of hierarchies not only among white women but also Indigenous women. Cross-cultural colonial relationships were structured according to these multiple hierarchies and cannot be reduced to simple binarisms. Finally, her memoirs serve as a powerful evocation of Indigenous and white women's agency in colonial history, the memory of which has been all but erased.

Minnie Brewer began writing her memoirs for her only child and adult son, John Cantrill, in 1915. Six exercise books covered with her large, spiky handwriting remained with the descendants until the very end of the twentieth century, when they were lodged, together with a helpful photocopy of a typed transcription, with the State Library of Victoria. When Lois Dean published the annotated memoirs in 2005, she sub-titled them 'Memoirs of a Squatter's Daughter', and described her heroine as 'surely the perfect partner for a nineteenth-century rural pioneer.'Ironically what makes Minnie's recollections exceptional amongst the limited available historical voices we have from colonial women, is that she was positioned neither as pioneer's wife nor squatter's daughter, at least at the time about which she was writing. Instead, Minnie occupied the precarious position of innumerable voiceless and forgotten women in Australia's colonial past – not attached by marriage or blood ties, but a dependent outsider, who contributed to the functioning of the household in return for her food, lodgings, and the protection it offered to unattached young females of the time.

Minnie, the eldest daughter of an immigrant Scottish horse-breeder, had been installed in a pioneer household on the South Australian-Victorian border as quite a young child, to be a 'companion' to the Hines family's daughter of the same age. Minnie remained there until Mrs Hines' death in 1873. That same year Mrs Hines' younger brother, John Brewer, purchased a property in partnership with his late sister's husband, on the Lachlan River near Lake Cargellico in central New South Wales. In February 1874 Minnie, now aged 21, accompanied the Brewer family – John (whom she always called 'Boss'), his wife Lizzie ('the Mrs'), their six children, and their nursemaid – to the new property, Merri Merrigal. It was here that Minnie would encounter Ellen, as well as a number of other local Aboriginal people who lived and worked there. Minnie lived on Merri Merrigal station for four years, departing for Melbourne after an argument with
'the Mrs' at the end of 1878. Dean's publication revealed the possibility of a major masquerade at the heart of both Minnie's life and memoirs: while Minnie wrote that John Cantrill was her adopted son, taken in by her after she had left Merri Merrigal and set up a boarding-house in Melbourne, it is likely that he was actually her natural child to John Brewer. Minnie and John Brewer eventually married, many years later, after Lizzie's death. 14

Minnie's position in the Brewer household was ambiguous, and indeed quite precarious. She was in unspoken competition not only with John Brewer's wife, but with the various other young women who were employed in the household as maids. Margaret Kiddie, historian of the Western District of Victoria, wrote that Aboriginal women 'bore the brunt' of the white sexual imbalance on the frontier, but 'wherever a likely white woman could be found . . . she became the object of such solicitation that if she did not choose one of the station hands as a protector she became the common property of all'. 15 Rebuffing the occasional attentions of white stockmen that came her way, Minnie's awareness of her vulnerability is betrayed by her recollections of one of the housemaids, who like her, had lived with the wife of a neighbouring station owner 'as companion and help' since about eight years of age. A 'very pretty girl', Kitty had made the mistake of marrying a stockman who was not only the 'handsomest' man on the station but an alcoholic: 'poor Kitty had a miserable and unhappy and hard life'. 16

Minnie's memoirs indicate that it could be easier for friendships to form between subordinate white and Aboriginal women than between the senior and subordinate white women, while subtle cross-cultural alliances could serve to undermine the authority of senior women in both white and Aboriginal hierarchies.

So, to return to Minnie's first meeting with Ellen. Having discovered the girl, Minnie called to 'Boss', who told Minnie to call Amelia, and Minnie 'ran to the blacks camp and brought Amelia. Amelia explained this was her 'poor sister Ellen', who lived with Amelia's mother on the 'other side of the river'. Ellen had run away with another young woman, Clara, the previous night: they were both frightened of 'Larry' – 'very bad blackfellow too much kill blackfellows & white fellow.' Boss then told Amelia that if she liked, she could put Ellen in the cellar with blankets and food, and he would give Amelia the key, so Ellen could be locked in. Amelia was Ellen's keeper but Minnie became her 'friend': 'I used to go down [to the cellar] with [Amelia] & Ellen soon got friends with me, but for a good while she would not talk to me.' 17

Rescuing 'a trembling and cowering Aboriginal woman from the waddy of her enraged husband' was a favoured 'scenario' for the pioneer 'gentlewoman'. 18 In some ways then a stock account, comparisons with other similar stories indicate Minnie Brewer's unconventionality. An early pioneer woman, Georgiana McCrae, gave an undated (c.1848) journal account of discovering 'a young lubra' in her bedroom one night, the girl's 'eyes beseeching pity, and her finger on her lip'. There is no suggestion
that McCrae might have run to 'the blacks camp' for help, nor did this anecdote serve as an opportunity to explain how she might have forged any kind of relationship with the young woman. The Aboriginal woman slipped out of McCrae's room at 'the first glimmer of dawn ... so softly that the distance between must have been many miles between us ere I discovered she had gone'. We find a similarly mannered sketch in the turn-of-the-century memoirs of Emmeline Macarthur (Leslie), on her husband's Canning Downs property at around the same time, where a wounded young Aboriginal woman took shelter for some days on the verandah outside her bedroom: compare the power dynamics represented in Macarthur's wry statement, 'I made interesting endeavours to converse in vain ... [she] knew very few English words,' with Minnie's comment that Ellen refused to talk to her. There was no contact with the local Indigenous community in Macarthur's account and the unnamed woman departed, never to be seen by Macarthur again. 17 In McCrae's resolution the social distance between white and black was emphasised. The woman's Aboriginal husband came the next day to 'enquire if his lubra had been about the house' and finding her later, 'nearly waddied her to death. A week later, Myrnong once more took her place beside her brutal lord and master.18

Minnie Brewer, in contrast, gave a dramatic and detailed account of the 'awful row' that broke out in the Aboriginal camp some nights later, with Boss and two of his stockmen rushing to find 'poor Clara' with 'the top of her head almost cut off'. Larry had tried to force her to go with him - Amelia and Amelia's husband, Davy, tried to 'kill' Larry, and Davy had been speared for his pains. While 'the others' attended to Davy, Amelia 'washed & fixed up [Clara's] head' and for two weeks Clara was nursed, and fed with 'spoons of milk', and when 'she got a bit better she was put in the cellar also'. The violence triggered a cooperative response between the Aboriginal and white communities in this account, while Larry - who ran off into the bush - appears as an aberrant character who disrupts both.

There was no 'gentlewoman rescuer' in Minnie Brewer's account. That authoritative role is played primarily by Ellen's sister Amelia, and to a lesser extent, by the Boss. Brewer's account erased the actual 'Mrs', Lizzie Brewer, who up to this point had not been mentioned. Explaining that after this, two Aboriginal men took turns at night 'to watch the camp', Minnie continued, gratuitously and rather smugly: 'Poor Mrs. was terribly frightened of blacks, they used to come sneaking round the house at night'. This then gave her the opportunity to boast: 'Nervous person as I have always been, I never felt the least fear of blacks, I suppose because I had lived so much amongst them as a child'.19

Certainly we cannot take Minnie's representations uncritically. At points throughout her memoirs Minnie reiterated her childhood connection with Aborigines (as McGuire argues, a key class-defining feature of the pioneer women's writing) to
assert the refined status of her family. Her proprietorial tone – 'I was so glad to see blacks once more. We always had so many at Merne [her early childhood home] or anywhere we lived',22 for instance – indicates that Minnie's professed enthusiasm for Aboriginal company was part of her wider performance of class status, over and above that of 'the Mrs'.

Connecting the stilted and somewhat pompous passages about her childhood recollections of Aborigines with her more vivid accounts of the Aboriginal people she knew at Merri Merrigal was the river. The river featured in Minnie's narrative whenever she recalled her relationships with Aboriginal people, making it plain that wherever there was water with abundant fish and game, there were thriving Aboriginal groups. Yet her recurrent use of this river motif is particularly suggestive given her memoirs also reveal her fear of drowning and, as Dean puts it, Minnie's 'horror of water'.23 The river might be said to be almost a metaphor for the fluid and naturalised shared space Minnie felt herself to be occupying, complete with its overtones of danger and loss of self.

On her arrival at Merri Merrigal, Minnie was struck first by the sight of Amelia – 'a very tall handsome lubra', with a 'very black' infant on her back and a 'very handsome little boy' at her side – and then, by the river:

[We] jumped out of the wagon and bolted down to the river which we could hear rushing along the high banks. It all looked so cool and lovely, the big gum trees so fresh and green along the sides of it and great big Billy Bongs everywhere as far as we could see, also wild clover high and thick in all directions. The terrible floods of two years before had so drowned the country after a dreadful drought that everything was still flourishing. You could see the marks high up on the tall gum trees where the flood waters had remained for some time. 24

Minnie explained how the previous residents had been trapped there during that flood. Later on, she would tell the story of how the floodwaters rose again, the white household forewarned by visiting Aborigines. 25 The river at Merri Merrigal, the Lachlan, loomed large in her memoirs, a great and threatening force of nature, understood only by Aborigines. At the same it was both boundary and connection between the station and the outside world, and it was also the key site of interaction between Minnie and the Aboriginal women.

Despite regular comings and goings between the Aboriginal camp on the river bank, and the homestead, there were clear socio-spatial delineations between the white and black residences. 26 But the river was a shared space, at least for the women. 'The Mrs. and I used to go up and down to the river to bathe, also the children, Amelia and several other lubras with us', Minnie wrote.27 As time went on, Minnie began going with the Aboriginal women on her own:

Often the lubras used to come to my window through the night and say, 'Come on Minnie and we go have a swim in the river.' I went with them and after a dip would sit on the bank and watch them swimming and going through wonderful
performances on moonlight nights. Ellen used to dive and swim up river under the water. I have often seen her also in the daylight, after some time return with only her foot to be seen above the water. Amelia used to throw her picaninny into the river, then bring it in like a great dog jumping in after it. When I returned to my room I used to lay on the bed all wet and in a few minutes would be dry as a bone. People, dogs, fowls and other animals used to wander about through the hot nights, some lay on the verandah, some on the garden path, some in the passage and others you could hear splashing in the river...

The image of white and black women bathing in the river together is, again, a staple trope of pioneer women's writings, most famously captured by Mrs Aeneas Gunn. But in contrast to the classic depiction of the affable white mistress throwing pieces of soap at her cavorting black washerwomen, Minnie's memories make no reference to work of any kind, but instead represent the river as a place where the women spend time together in companionable tranquillity and enjoyment.

And as a place where women played together, the river was also a place of gender alliance. Here, the Aboriginal women apparently supported Minnie in her ongoing feud with the children's tutor, a Mr Scott from Melbourne. Minnie's clash with Scott points to the conflicts and rivalry that existed between white men and women in subordinate positions in frontier colonial households. Scott's duties included collecting the mail from the other side of the river via flying fox, and he apparently used the opportunity to torment Minnie by strewing her mail along the river bank: 'He did do it again many times... but the lubras always watched him and went for my letters'. Though this could be read in a more orthodox pioneer memoir as an assertion of Aboriginal women's subservient devotion, this recollection sparked Minnie's account of how she first met her 'little black mate Ellen'. It would seem that Minnie herself quite genuinely recalled relations of friendship, although these recollections were sometimes tinged with ambivalence.

Both Scott and the river again featured prominently in one of Minnie's later stories, about her near-drowning. A compelling account in its own right, the incident indicates Minnie's deeper uneasiness about her relationship with the Aboriginal women.

The blacks had a number of bark canoes on the river. Two of the black girls, my mate Ellen and another, Clara, the one who had her head so badly split by Larry, were anxious to get me into the canoe, so one day I did. The river was running very strongly and made the boat unsteady. I got frightened and stood up and over I went in one of the deepest parts. The two girls, who could swim like ducks, had hold of me in a moment, they would, I think, have got me out if I had kept quiet, but I struggled and got hold of them. Ellen, who was a little skeleton could do nothing, so yelled as loud as she could. The next moment a large black thing flopped down almost on top of us. I was dragged out and left on the bank to get my breath. All the others had disappeared.
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The ‘large black thing’ was Amelia, rescuing Minnie as if she was her ‘picaninny’. Minnie confessed ‘Of course’ she was ‘alright but never got over the fright’. Nevertheless she soon found out why the others had disappeared - Amelia apparently took it upon herself to punish the two younger women for the incident. She ‘got her waddy and hunted the two girls for miles till she caught them and gave them a thrashing, poor things’.32

This incident raises interesting questions about the nature of cross-cultural relationships between women at the time. We could surmise that Amelia held a position of authority in the Aboriginal community, and saw it as her responsibility to ensure that relations with the white women – at least, between her sisters and Minnie – were carefully handled. Had Minnie drowned, there is no doubt it would have been a serious matter for all concerned. This realisation begs the question then, as it possibly did to Amelia, of the motivations of Clara and Ellen, subconscious or otherwise.

Scott, who presumably felt himself mocked by Minnie’s easy friendships with the Aboriginal women, ‘was greatly pleased when he heard I was nearly drowned’. The odious tutor wasted no time in taking the opportunity it provided him to represent an entirely different version. So, wrote Minnie, he left Merri Merrigal soon afterwards and went straight to see Mrs Brewer’s father. Scott ‘told him he had nearly lost his life in trying to save me when the blacks had tried to drown me by tipping me out of a canoe into the river. He told a long yarn, made out his wonderful bravery and long suffering.’ In supplanting Amelia as Minnie’s champion, he was rewarded with £20, recorded Minnie with disgust.33

Installing himself as the manly white hero, Scott’s version denied both Amelia’s role as rescuer, and the existence of genuine ‘mateship’ between white and black women. Indeed while generations of Australian historians have considered ‘mateship’ central to the Australian experience and national identity, the concurrence seems to be that the concept explicitly excludes women, and cannot be used by them.34 Yet Minnie’s use of the term is a striking demonstration of its currency for Minnie herself in the early twentieth century.

Perhaps, after all, elements of this relationship might be productive in considering women’s cross-cultural relationships. Defined by a historian as early as 1847, colonial mateship was based upon work, importantly, and a sense of mutual dependence:

> There is a great deal of this mutual regard and trust engendered by two men working thus together in the otherwise solitary bush; habits of mutual helpfulness arise, and these elicit gratitude, and that leads on to regard. Men under these circumstances often stand by one another through thick and thin; in fact it is a universal feeling that a man ought to be able to trust his own mate in anything.35

Neither Minnie nor Ellen were alone in a ‘solitary bush’ by any means, but there were certain aspects to their positions at Merri Merrigal, not least the ambivalence of
their status in the households as neither family nor regular employees, that could have forged a sense of 'mutual regard and trust', and a desire to 'stand by one another', at least from Minnie's perspective. Perhaps the traditional exclusion of women from notions of mateship derives simply from a failure to recognize women's labour as 'work'.

While Minnie never described Ellen as a servant, and was evasive about her own contribution to the household, in the enclosed female space of the white household they did work alongside each other. The impression given in Minnie's memoirs is of a household of mostly young women all under the authority of the Mrs, all interacting fairly amicably and on more or less equal terms. For instance, Minnie discovered that one of the housemaids 'had been learning to ride. She had been out riding with my mate Ellen who had become a good rider.' At another point, Ellen 'helped' the nursemaid, who was unwell, with 'minding the children,' before the maid's sister joined them. During an extended visit of the Mrs' brother and his wife, Minnie wrote that she helped out - 'Emily [the nursemaid] was not fit for much and Ellen was a lazy little monkey and often bolted when she thought that she was wanted.' It seems that Ellen was indeed expected to work around the house, and, more significantly, that Minnie saw herself as being obliged to bear her load when she did not. They were, therefore, 'working together', and their relationship, we must imagine, was somewhat competitive as well as friendly, with Minnie jostling to raise herself above Ellen in the household hierarchy, the casual insult she threw at her 'mate' in hindsight being quite telling in this regard.

Minnie found Ellen and brought her back on occasions, seemingly out of friendship (as opposed to hauling back a runaway), providing us with a striking image of bringing her 'mate' home on the front of her horse:

Ellen my mate suddenly disappeared, some of the blacks said they feared 'Larry' had got her as he had been seen up the river. Boss was away camping so we could not get him to help[: | W]e knew Ellen was fond of grog & would like to get it if she could, so Charlie [a stockman] & I got our horses & rode down to old Mrs Pattersons 15 miles down the river & there we found her, laying dead drunk, a short distance from the Shanty[.]. She was a skinny little thing, Charlie pushed & I pulled & we got her up in front of me, where she lay helpless. I was riding one of the boundary riders quiet horses & we could not go out of a walk for fear of Ellen falling. We got home late & locked her in the cellar.'

Run by an 'old woman of the worst character,' the Shanty was a river site of disorderly interaction that conjures up quite a different image of cross-cultural relationships from Minnie's moonlit swims. Located 15 miles down the river and just outside the boundary of Merri Merrigal, Minnie - who was very critical of the frontier drinking culture - elsewhere described the grog-shop where the men employed on the station drank their earnings, as 'a beastly place made of bagging nailed onto logs and only 'slush lights' were used and you could see the form of each person through the bagging, some drunken men and no women in the place.'

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Minnie was relatively tolerant in her recollections of Ellen's drinking – not so the Boss. Minnie continued her story:

A few days later she was missing again & coming home near dark Boss found her drunk again, laying on the verandah of Abraham Myers cottage. He [Boss] took her up & threw her into the Billybong close by. . . .

Myers and his wife, along with an Indian couple, the Bombays, were boundary riders on the property. They lived in their own cottages with their families, and there was nothing untoward in Ellen seeking refuge on Myers' verandah. But the drowning motif that recurs throughout her recollections of cross-cultural contacts is here shifted to the Aboriginal woman, the tacit sexual menace given vivid expression in the white man's intimidation of Ellen. In the retelling, Ellen's voice comes across with rare immediacy:

She told me later, 'Mate Boss tried to drown me, he did mate, he got a stick & every time I come up, he push me under again, then I gammon drown to frighten him & he pull [me] out & drag me all the way home to Amelia & Amelia she beat me.'

We hear a young Aboriginal woman complaining to her white friend about her tribulations not only with a white man, but with the Aboriginal woman who is also in a position of authority over her – in a way that Minnie is clearly not. While we cannot be sure how Ellen imagined the meaning of 'mateship', if we are to accept Minnie's assertion that Ellen called her 'her mate', it shows that the term had currency also for at least one Aboriginal woman on the colonial frontier.

An assertive Aboriginal voice is also central to another incident Minnie recounted, perhaps the most curious of all the stories of her interactions with Aboriginal women. This again featured the river, and the threat of drowning, but concerned Amelia.

One night Amelia the lubra was heard calling the Mrs. to go to her down near the river. She went, & when near Amelia called out to her go away Mrs. so she returned A while after Mr Stanton [the new tutor] came in to tell me Amilia was calling me to come to her quick[.] I ran down, & she called out go away Minnie I no want you. I said you are crazy Amilia I wont come back again[.] I no sooner returned to the house than I heard 'Minnie Minnie come back'][.] I waited a while, she kept on calling, so I went right down to her. She said, 'take that boy & chuck him in the river'. I said 'what boy?' – 'dat boy there, chuck him in the river'][.] I looked down, & there was a baby boy right enough I said 'do you want me to drown him', 'Yes chuck him in.' I lifted him up & walked towards the river, she called out, 'dount you drown that boy, you bring back boy.' So I took him back to her.

Amelia's voice – at once equivocal and imperative – is here offered up for the reader's interrogation. Minnie offers no direct criticism or comment.

Percy was born after Minnie and the Brewers had been there for at least a year (1875, according to Minnie's pencilled annotation). We must recall that Amelia had an eight-year-old son as well as a baby who was still 'on her back' in early 1874, so the birth
of another child the following year might not have been altogether welcomed by Amelia. Minnie did not state whether the baby was mixed-descent, whether from delicacy, or because she did not consider this to be relevant, we cannot know (the son took Amelia’s husband’s surname). The implication of the account is that Amelia wanted Minnie to dispose of the child by drowning him, and yet even that is unclear. Assuming that this episode actually happened and was not a product of fevered or hostile imagination, it could be interpreted as Amelia testing Minnie. For if she genuinely wished the baby drowned, why would she not have drowned the child herself? Or sought the help of another Aboriginal woman, rather than Minnie? Why did she first call out for Mrs Brewer, then change her mind? Why did she turn Minnie back, at first? Did she hope that Minnie’s compassion or sense of duty might be aroused, and she would take the child herself to look after? Did she intend to give Minnie the child, perhaps concerned that Minnie—a grown woman—had no child or husband of her own, and expectant that she would want one? (Remembering that the Mrs had a number of children already, and was almost certainly herself then pregnant.) Why did she not ask one of the other single childless white women? And what did she make of Minnie’s unruffled response, and apparent willingness to drown the newborn? Did Minnie pass or did she fail the test?

The incident is one that calls for an ethnographic imagination. Amelia’s baby was born after the canoeing episode, when Amelia had saved Minnie, which may have some bearing on the story. It seems to have been a moment of gendered cross-cultural encounter, with the Aboriginal woman—who had clearly established her position of authority—calling upon the white woman to prove her mettle in some way. The issue of Aboriginal infanticide is a volatile one in Australian history; the persistent claim that Aboriginal women were unnaturally prompt to destroy unwanted infants justifying the (ongoing) abrogation of Aboriginal rights. At the same time stories of white women ‘rescuing’ babies and children from their Aboriginal mothers abound. In all these accounts, most certainly apocryphal rather than historical, there is no sense of the desperation that may have driven mothers to give up their children, but nor is there any sense of the Aboriginal women negotiating this encounter in any way. Such stories elevate the moral standing of white women on the frontier and degrade the Aboriginal women; they simultaneously denote agency to white women, and passivity to Aboriginal women.

But Minnie’s account elevates herself only in relation to ‘the Mrs’, for it is she whom Amelia calls upon, and she who responds to Amelia’s call—not the white wife. In graphically depicting herself hoisting the newborn up and walking determinedly towards the river, Minnie resists absolutely being cast in the role of rescuer. In the end, it is because Amelia commands her to, that Minnie ‘took him back to her’, and despite then setting Amelia up in the washhouse for the night, with blankets for her and sugared
water and a flannel dress for the baby, she leaves Amelia to look after the baby herself.

This episode is rendered the more perplexing when we learn that Minnie was prepared to take on the care of the Mrs’ newborn. Not very long after Amelia’s baby boy appeared so suddenly, the Mrs herself gave birth, to a ‘fat, strong and roaring’ daughter, assisted by Minnie and the nursemaid. This new baby was ‘a cross, discontented monkey like herself’ [the Mrs], but Minnie found she alone was able to quiet the baby at night, and soon took over her charge altogether. Given that Minnie was writing this memoir for the son she would later adopt, there is a powerful emotional undercurrent in her rejection of Amelia’s baby. Minnie’s adopted son, also fatherless, was supposedly one of the illegitimate twins born to a white servant girl, whose sister’s child Minnie took care of, in Melbourne after she left the Brewer’s household. Minnie’s casual adoptions and other intermittent care of children point to an unfamiliar and unrecorded world of single women and unmarried, or overburdened, mothers, where it was commonplace for children to be moved between carers. We must judge Minnie’s unsentimental response to Amelia’s appeal in light of the understanding that mothering was hard work unattached women were simply expected to shoulder. And if the speculation that Minnie’s adopted son was in fact her natural son is correct, then we must also realise that the prevalence of such informal fostering masked a number of similar scandals. Perhaps it was particularly unwise for a white woman in Minnie’s precarious position, to take on an Aboriginal woman’s child, had Minnie even been tempted to make that offer. The child of her mistress was another matter.

That the baby girl quickly acquired the nickname ‘Burri’ (or ‘Bouri’) which Minnie explained was the Aboriginal word for ‘baby’, suggests that Minnie nevertheless spent much of her time with the Aboriginal women while she looked after the Mrs’s daughter, including presumably Amelia who was nursing her boy. It might even suggest that Minnie had some unresolved feelings about her rejection of Amelia’s child, particularly as she maintained an interest in Percy’s life. In her account of his ‘introduction into this world’, as she put it, Minnie recorded that Percy ‘afterwards became a first rate race rider for the Brewer family’, and went over her memoirs later to specifically note his full name and birth year. And, she informed her reader at a later point, Percy ended up ‘married to a white girl’ and living in Caulfield in Melbourne. Did she suspect that Percy, like Burri and perhaps her own son to come, might have been John Brewer’s child?

The reappearance of Percy in her memoirs was conveyed again through Amelia’s voice, Minnie describing how she was visited by Amelia in Melbourne many years later, who gave her the update about her son ‘(dat boy’ she once wanted me to drown)’. By mimicking and reiterating Amelia’s words on the night of Percy’s birth, Minnie not only took the opportunity to remind the reader of this episode, suggesting its significance in her memories, but also implies that the story may have become a shared recollection bonding the two women.
The poignant account of Amelia's visit to Minnie in Melbourne serves not only as the conclusion to Minnie Brewer's recollections of both Ellen and Amelia, but to close the account of her life on the colonial frontier, and to open the account of her life in Melbourne. An argument between Minnie and the Mrs had been the culmination of many years of personal tension between the two. Minnie decided to leave Merri Merrigal, going to stay with the Boss's brother and his wife nearby, to await a lift to a steamer for Melbourne. The following week, 'poor Amelia and Ellen walked all the way from Merri Merrigal to see me once more and say goodbye'. Minnie asked her hosts if they could stay overnight, and have something to eat, and when the two women left to go back the next morning she 'walked with them for a while'. Twenty-two years later, around 1900, Minnie saw Amelia again, in Melbourne.

Amelia was, presumably, visiting her son Percy. Minnie welcomed the opportunity to take Amelia about and show her 'all I thought she would care to see'. Minnie took her to the seaside – Amelia 'wanted to jump in there and then' – and to the zoo, where she was 'crazy with delight':

She laughed & yelled at the Elephant but would not ride him. She laughed till she cried at everything she saw, at last I found a large crowd was following us where ever we went, more amused at my Lubra than anything else.

The possessive adjective might have been unconscious, but it betrays Minnie's acute awareness of the distinctive shift in power relations in the city. How out of place Amelia was, carrying a pair of boots that she had 'thought she should wear in town, but poor thing she couldn't'. This was not the river at Merri Merrigal.

Poor Amelia I am sure she would never forget that day. She returned soon after to N. S. Wales I never saw her again. She told me she was soon going to die & she did.

Amelia's authority was destroyed; Minnie's 'mate' Ellen's ending was bleaker. 'Ellen, I never saw again. Larry killed her, poor thing,' wrote Minnie with characteristic bluntness. She did not explain how she came by this information, but it was probably through Amelia. Amelia had 'had a large family' since Minnie had last seen her, which she had 'left at the Mission Station in N.S.W. for a time'. The Warangesda Mission, founded by the missionary John Gribble at Darlington Point in 1880, was in Wiradjuri country, at some considerable distance from Merri Merrigal, but the missionary's pressing need to recruit a viable population meant he 'received people from hundreds of miles away'. For whatever personal reasons Amelia left her own country to move to Warangesda Mission, like so many other Aboriginal people all around the south-east at the turn of the century and well into the period that Minnie was writing her memoirs, she and her family were now coming under the unsmiling administration of the state. In 1887 the New South Wales government transferred administrative control of the mission to the government appointed Aborigines Protection Board. By 1915 the Board would have gained the powers it needed to ensure virtually complete control over all aspects of Indigenous women's lives. As the 'Great Australian Silence' enveloped Amelia's
and Ellen’s memory, and ushered living, functioning and dynamic communities of individuals into the amorphous past, Minnie began writing her memoirs.

Minnie Brewer’s memoirs provide a unique insight into the relationships that existed between white and Aboriginal women in colonial NSW. Alongside the assertion of Minnie’s own historical presence and agency, Minnie’s account provides, almost unwittingly, an assertion of Indigenous women’s presence and agency in the colonial past. ‘Mateship’ between Aboriginal and white women depended not only upon being in the position to ‘work together’ but upon a willingness to admit the role of both as active agents in their own lives and histories. Minnie’s recollections caution us to hesitate drawing conclusions on women’s cross-cultural relationships that are based on the writings of ‘pioneer wives’ and ‘squatters’ daughters’ alone: there were other women and other relationships we can barely envisage. And it seems appropriate to conclude with her own transitory vision of the Aboriginal people of Merri Merrigal, provided in one of Minnie’s most evocative passages in her journal that was, unfortunately, left off the copied transcript, and therefore from the published version of her memoirs. Minnie wrote:

On dark nights at Merri Merrigal, we used to watch them as they traveled for miles along the bends of the river, for we could not see them of course, only the light they carried, which was bright one minute & gone the next. 49
James Dawson is credited as the author of *Australian Aborigines*, a significant proportion of the work was undertaken by his daughter Isabella.


4. This article, which has benefited from the suggestions made by an insightful anonymous reader, expands on a portrait of Dawson briefly sketched in Raymond Madden, 'Victoria's Western District' in Peter Beilharz & T. Hogan, eds, *Sociology: place, time and division*, South Melbourne, Vic.: Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 99–102.


7. Dawson, *Australian Aborigines*, p. lxxxiii (see entry on 'Wuurna weewheetch').


10. Dawson, 'Scrapbook'.

11. Ibid.

12. Dawson, *Australian Aborigines*, p. v. Note also that this was a widely held belief, and in context, a reasonable one given the drastic population collapse suffered by Aboriginal groups in colonial Victoria.

13. Ibid.


15. Ibid, pp. iv-v.

16. The cartoon was drawn by John Tenniel, a regular *Punch* contributor who was demonstrably 'Hibernia-phobic'. He was also the illustrator of the original *Alice in Wonderland*.

17. 'Caliban' is the bestial and evil character of Shakespeare's *Tempest*.


20. Dawson, 'Scrapbook'.

21. Dawson, 'Scrapbook'.


My Mate Ellen


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7. The 'sexual jealousy' thesis - the idea that white women were jealous of Aboriginal women and saw them as sexual rivals for white men - has been used by historians since the 1970s to explain or argue for colonial white women's hostility to Aboriginal women, and by implication racial discord in general. See Miriam Dixson, The Real Matilda: women and identity in Australia, 1788 to 1975 Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1976, p. 198. See also Lyn Riddett, "Watch the White Women Fade', Hecate vol. 19, no. 1, 1993, pp. 73, 87, 90; Bobbi Sykes, 'Black Women in Australia: A History', Ian Mercer ed., The Other Half: women in Australian society Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1975, pp. 313-321.

8. Lois Dean ed., Minnie: memoirs of a squatter's daughter. By Mary Emily Susannah Brewer, self-published, 2005, p. 439. Dean had been given copies of the first two journals by the family and presented readings from them in a 20-episode series on ABC Radio Southeast in 2000, and such was the positive reaction of audiences that she proceeded to publish the entire journals.

9. Research for this article is based upon a close and comparative reading of the original journals, the typescript, and Dean's edited version.

10. Dean, Minnie, pp. 5-6; and personal communication (telephone) with Victoria Haskins, 21 January 2009.


13. Dean, Minnie, pp. 218, 381.

14. 'Brewer Memoirs', Box 299/9 Book 2; Dean, Minnie, p. 193.


18. McCrae, Georgiana's Journal, p. 224. McCrae then concluded her account with some 'not very good verses' in her own hand that her editor, her grandson, chose not to reproduce.

19. 'Brewer Memoirs', Box 299/9 Book 2; Dean, Minnie, p. 193.


22. Dean, Minnie, p. 183. And at this point in fact she went on to reminisce about her father's 'black boy', and then, more bitterly, of how the South Australian government had refused to allow 'her
people’ to take his widow and his daughter, her younger brother’s nursemaid, back with them to Victoria when they left.

26. See also Dean, *Minnie*, p. 237: faced with an emergency with a sick child when the Brewers were visiting a neighbouring station, Minnie waited till ‘it began to show light’ before going to ‘the blacks’ camp’ to ask one of the men there to take a note to the Mrs. At another point Minnie Brewer described how the Aboriginal women and children ‘used to come into the garden and watch’ when, the family danced on the verandah in the evenings: Dean, *Minnie*, p. 219.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
36. Transcript of Brewer Memoirs, Box 299/10 (c), Book 3.
39. ‘Brewer Memoirs’, Book 3, Box 299/10 (c).
41. Ibid.
42. ‘Brewer Memoirs’, Book 4, Box 299/10 (d); Dean, *Minnie*, p. 285
43. ‘Brewer Memoirs’, Book 3, Box 299/10 (c).
45. Book 3, Box 299/10 (c)
45. Transcript of Brewer Memoirs, Box 299/10 (c), Book 3. See Dean, *Minnie*, p. 248.
46. For example, see Inga Clendinnen, ‘Spearing the Governor’, *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 33, no. 118, 2002, pp. 157-174.
47. For a discussion of the issue of infanticide and colonial Aboriginal women’s agency, see Lynette Russell, ‘“Dirty Domestics and Worse Cooks”: Aboriginal women’s agency and domestic frontiers, Southern Australia, 1800-1850’, *Frontiers*, vol. 28, nos 1 & 2, 2007, pp. 18-46.
48. Dean, *Minnie*, pp. 254-6, 266. Minnie told the mother that if she insisted on taking the baby back, and the baby became ill, she, Minnie, would ‘have nothing more to do with [the baby]’. The Mrs ‘knew very well when I said a thing I meant it’ (like Amelia, perhaps) ‘... so I heard no more about it.’ However, when the Mrs asked to take her next-born child, a boy, ‘off her hands’, Minnie refused: ‘I would have nothing to do with him, said Burri was quite enough’, Dean, *Minnie*, p. 292.
49. Years later, living in Melbourne, Minnie would take on the care of the infant son of a sick servant girl named Christine; after that child died tragically of diphtheria, Minnie ‘adopted’ the boy she raised to adulthood, according to her one of a pair of illegitimate twins born to Christine’s sister (the sisters having boarded with her for a time). Dean, *Minnie*, pp. 342-3, 345, 361, 387, 401-402.
51. Transcript of Brewer Memoirs, Box 299/10 (c), Book 3.
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52. Dean, Minnie, p. 317.
53. Ibid.
54. See Dean, Minnie, p. 318. In the original memoirs, the story of Amelia's visit overlaps from the end of the fourth and into the fifth, the remaining two of six books of memoirs dealing with her life in Melbourne.
55. Dean, Minnie, p. 316.
56. Dean, Minnie, p. 317.
57. Transcript of Brewer Memoirs, Box 299/10 (e), Book 5.
58. Ibid.
59. Ibid.
60. Peter Read, A Hundred Years War: the Wiradjuri people and the state, Sydney: Pergamon Press, 1988, p. 37. Ironically, an Aboriginal reserve would be set up many decades later near the site of Merri Merrigal, in 1947. This was the Murrin Bridge reserve (still functioning as an Aboriginal community today), near the township of Lake Cargelligo, which would accommodate the people formerly housed at Menindee mission station, having been forcibly moved there in 1933 from their various ancestral lands in the Cobar and Menindee Lakes area of NSW. See Bernard Tiernay, 'Summary History of Murrin Bridge' (extract from paper, TAFE Lake Cargelligo), website for the Murrin Bridge Aboriginal Vineyard, https://www.murrinbridgewines.com.au/webcontent3.htm, accessed 15 April 2009.
61. See Beverley Gulambali Elphick and Don Elphick, The Camp of Mercy: an historical and biographical record of the Warangesda Aboriginal Mission/Station, Canberra: Gulambali Aboriginal Research, 2004. There is no surviving record of her arrival on the station but the records indicate that some of her children (including the son who was a baby in 1874, but not Percy) were there and presumably herself also.

Fishers and Farmers

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