Patagonian Sojourn

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Anne Whitehead
BLUESTOCKING IN PATAGONIA
Profile, $35hb, 312pp, 1 86197 504 X

IN PARADISE MISLAID, Anne Whitehead captivated readers with a nicely judged blend of elements. Here was a documentary that interwove two travellers’ tales, each with the resonance of quest narratives. Those ‘peculiar people’ who went off to Paraguay as part of William Lane’s experimental Utopian settlement were seeking a just community where the labourer would not only be worthy of his hire, but actually receive it; while Whitehead was pursuing the historian’s endless quest to bring back into present memory the always receding reality of the past. But Whitehead’s journey was not made only in the mind or in the archives: it had a literal dimension, involving following physically ‘in the steps of’ her subject. This led to an interesting relationship between past and present in her work, a layered intercutting, sometimes positving connection, sometimes disjunction. The effect was analogous to the intercutting techniques of documentaries, and it’s not surprising to find that Whitehead has worked extensively as television producer, film director and scriptwriter. It also offered, in a way, a gentle rebuff to any undeconstructed readerly yearning for the complete and logically sequential narrative that we might once have thought history could give us.

Bluestocking in Patagonia adds a much stronger and more focused biographical element, enabling its Australian distributor, Allen & Unwin, to advertise it as ‘The true story of Australian national icon, Dame Mary Gilmore’s adventures in South America’. At this point, the narrative fills in the largely uncharted months before Will Gilmore took up his shearing contract at ‘Killik Aike’ in December 1900. While Mary remained in Buenos Aires, Will found two different stints of employment. The first, at Santa Rosa, was already documented; but the second was mentioned in one of Mary’s letters only as being near the mouth of the Río de la Plata and owned by a Scottish family. The serendipity that often waits on the prepared enables Whitehead to identify the estancia as the misleadingly titled ‘Los Yngleses’, although actually settled by Scots. A visit to the current owners affords her an enlightening glimpse of the life and attitudes of the current pastoral aristocracy of Argentina, and throws considerable retrospective light, for her and the reader, on the unlikelihood of any successful accommodation between socialist Mary Gilmore and the landed Fentons of ‘Killik Aike’.

From Buenos Aires, the Gilmores made a lengthy and uncomfortable sea voyage to the frontier town of Rio Gallegos, an episode that provides Whitehead with jumping-off points for side trips to the South American experiences of naturalists W.H. Hudson and Charles Darwin; to General Roca’s campaigns of extermination against the indigenous inhabitants of the South; and to the Welsh settlements of Chubut. From Gallegos, itself a rich source of digressive narration into, among other things, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, Will set out alone for ‘Killik Aike’. Again, Whitehead’s narrative fills in a relatively undocumented period of ill health and unhappiness in Mary’s life, since it was some time before she was able to join Will on the undertaking that she would act as governess to the Fentons’ daughter. From Gilmore’s

information while those familiar with the earlier work are not wearily crying déjà vu.

The core of Whitehead’s narrative consists in following the steps of the Gilmore family from Paraguay southwards into Patagonia, but each step, either through location or event, allows a branching out into Argentina’s past history and its present condition. At one level, Whitehead’s book has the engagingly tangential quality of lively gossip (including family photographs), but its layering of material and the quality of research and observation make it something more complex and significant.

On leaving Paraguay, the Gilmores went first to Buenos Aires, which Whitehead represents in 1900 as a city of tangoos, where some 40,000 unemployed lived in sight of the spiralling personal fortunes of colonial opportunists, amid a programme of conspicuous public building by which ‘a dusty colonial town was turned into the endlessly extolled “Paris of South America”’. At this point, the narrative fills in the largely

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letters during this period, Whitehead develops a not entirely sympathetic portrait of a woman who, despite considerable strength of character, could be manipulative in pursuit of what she wanted, even to the extent of playing upon ill health, which, while undoubtedly genuine, was not without a psychosomatic component. Later, a different perspective on Mary’s situation is provided by Whitehead’s Argentinian travelling companion, who censures what he sees as Will’s failure to fulfil the first duty of a husband, the protection of his wife in a dangerous environment. Between the two positions, underpinned respectively by feminism’s desire for women of strength and patriarchy’s desire for men of machismo, we are left less with any final conclusion than with an awareness of two people struggling as best they can to honour their relationship under adverse circumstances. Whitehead is quite capable of explicit judgment, especially on acts of brutality such as General Roca’s campaign of genocide, but she extends considerable contextual understanding to individuals, and usually lets them put their positions without direct intervention, although not without oblique indications of sympathy or antipathy, as in her encounters with the upper-class Argentinian landowners who are her hosts on two major occasions.

The second of these encounters occurs when Whitehead, revisiting ‘Killik Aike’, attempts to reconstruct the culture clash that doomed Mary’s attempt to live there. She puts little emphasis on Mary’s avowed dislike for her adolescent pupil, concentrating instead on what her hosts see as crucial: Mary’s failure to comprehend the gender and adolescent pupil, concentrating instead on what her hosts see as crucial: Mary’s failure to comprehend the gender and class taboos breached when, as a woman and as a governess, she not only conversed with the estancia’s workers, but appeared critical of their treatment at the hands of their employer. Whitehead accepts the essential truth of the material dramatised by Gilmore in ‘They Called Him José’ and believes she may have identified the cruelly treated José in the person of Jesús Vasquez, a peon recorded in the ‘Killik Aike’ wages book. This strand of industrial strife leads her to the Argentinian workers’ strikes of 1920–22 and their savage repression in massacres not fully revealed until Osvaldo Bayer’s three-volume history and Hector Olivera’s film La Patagonia Rebelde in the early 1970s. Both were instantly banned by the Argentine Ministry of Defence, which perhaps agreed with Whitehead’s view that the seeds of Argentina’s future history were sown in the army’s violent and secretive exercise of power in these 1920s incidents.

But this is in the final chapter, ‘Afterwards’. Before that, Whitehead must complete the Gilmore’s Patagonian sojourn. Her account suggests that there was an initial stiffening of Mary’s backbone on her return to Gallegos. Settled in more congenial living quarters than previously, Mary discovered indications of sympathy or antipathy, as in her encounters with the upper-class Argentinian landowners who are her hosts on two major occasions.

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