

***Bluestocking in Patagonia* by Anne Whitehead (Allen & Unwin, 2003)**

Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers' Radio, Radio Adelaide.

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It seems odd that Anne Whitehead has chosen to call her book about Mary Gilmore *Bluestocking in Patagonia*, since she quotes Gilmore early in the book as saying 'blue stocking' is a 'repulsive title.' However, this instance of disregard sets the scene for a book which gives an unsympathetic impression overall of the author's attitude to her subject, despite references to her 'bravery ... and sense of humanity.'

Anne Whitehead does not like Mary Gilmore. She disapproves of her attitudes to other races and her feelings for her husband, and shows little real sympathy with her unhappiness during the times she spent isolated in various places, ill, friendless and unable to speak the language.

Whitehead calls Gilmore a racist several times. Part of the problem, I think, is Whitehead's failure to account for or try to imagine how differently people saw the world a hundred years ago, when the British Empire was not a subject for amused incredulity but a fact of life so entrenched that most Australians would never even consider that it might not continue indefinitely. She finds it "puzzling" that she thought it acceptable to remove Indian skulls from burial sites as souvenirs, even though it was perfectly normal practice for the time. Now we know better, but then, even reasonably well-informed people did not realise the complexity of indigenous cultures and beliefs. She quotes Gilmore's own words evoking the immense technological changes during her lifetime, from "a slush lamp ... to the tallow candle ... from kerosene lamps to

gas, from gas to electric light.” But she cannot conceal her surprise that ‘the former racist of Paraguay became,’ years later, ‘one of the early European campaigners for Aboriginal rights.’ One of the things that is clear from the quotations from Gilmore’s prose in the book is that she was an intelligent woman who was interested in learning about the world. Why should it be surprising that she changed her views on a subject like indigenous rights?, if indeed she did. Some of the examples of Gilmore’s alleged racism seem to be little more than expressions of temporary discomfort in a strange land, like the train trip she described in a letter to a friend, “in a filthy third class carriage full of natives, of whose language I was quite ignorant.” At other times she expressed horror at stories she heard about violence against the native people, like the campaign to wipe out the Indians in Argentina in the nineteenth century.

If Whitehead dislikes and disapproves of Mary Gilmore, she seems to positively despise her husband Will, finding it difficult to understand how a well-educated woman could feel anything higher than lust for a man who ‘had received no formal schooling after the age of ten’. Despite this, however, Mary Gilmore’s poems and letters show a deep love for her husband, and she was devastated when he died in 1945, even though they had been living separate lives for some years by then.

Bluestocking in Patagonia is not only a biography of Mary Gilmore’s six-year sojourn in South America. It is also a travel book. Whitehead visits the places where Gilmore lived, and alternates her own account with the historical narrative. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with that. Cassandra Pybus’ *Raven Road*, for example, or Nicolas Rothwell’s wonderful *Wings of the Kite Hawk*, follow this kind of format. But Whitehead’s travels add little to her

narrative. Too often she goes off on a tangent, and we are treated to chatty accounts of the lives of people who are concerned with Gilmore's story only at several removes, like the family who now live on the farm where Will Gilmore might perhaps have worked for a month during 1900, a place Mary Gilmore never visited.

These digressions could have been interesting and entertaining if Whitehead was a perceptive observer with a real flair for description. Unfortunately, her style, while competent, is not particularly expressive or in any way elegant. There are self-conscious poetic touches – “I imagine myself as a firefly watching from the encroaching shadows” – which don't often succeed in lifting the prose. And there are non-sequiturs and contradictions which give the impression of careless editing.

There is clearly a wealth of unpublished prose of Mary Gilmore's in the National Library, and one thing this book does is bring it to our attention. But although Gilmore was an extraordinary woman, what is quoted here is not great literature, and it is surrounded with a lot of extraneous padding which often amounts to little more than gossip.