

***The Letters of George & Elizabeth Bass* by Miriam Estensen (Allen & Unwin, 2009)**

It seems to have been a truth universally acknowledged among early Australian explorers that a single man in possession of a well-laden ship must be in want of a wife. She would then be left to languish ashore while he embarked on his adventures. Matthew Flinders followed the fashion by marrying Ann Chappelle in 1801, and not seeing her again for nine years. To his uxorious credit, it must be said that he did try to bring her to Port Jackson, even to the extent of smuggling her aboard the *Investigator*.

But it was his mate George Bass who pioneered the practice by marrying Elizabeth Waterhouse a year earlier, passing three months of marital bliss, and sailing into the wide blue yonder never to return. Miriam Estensen has already written biographies of both men illustrating their similarities and differences. She continues her own scholarly exploration with the publication of these letters recently acquired by Sydney's Mitchell Library.

The preface and jacket notes stretch the actual scope of the study. Surely the 'windows into life in New South Wales' aren't worth considering in the same context as works such as Grace Karsken's *The Colony* or *The Fatal Shores* of Robert Hughes. Nor is the correspondence aptly described as 'a love affair'. If anything, it is a brutal demonstration of the fate of a reckless man and the doom of a woman unfortunate enough to have married him.

George Bass was a Lincolnshire surgeon intent on the possibilities of the newly founded colony, and already the co-voyager of Matthew Flinders in his coastal chartings when he loaded his brig with merchandise and met the sister of one of his investors, Henry Waterhouse. Elizabeth was ripe, roguish and immediately infatuated with the charming visitor. Before you could say 'the good ship Venus' she was wearing his ring.

Bass emerges as impetuous and ambitious at best, and an absolute oaf in his cups. Having sneaked a posh marriage at the prime altar of St James in Piccadilly with a woman his moral and social superior, he gave her enough of a taste for amorous *jouissance* to be able to rely on her wish for more. She had the quill out even before he cleared Spithead. But instead of replying to her delicate hints of pregnancy with enthusiasm or anxiety, he takes it upon himself to correct her spelling and grammar. In an age where one of its greatest entitled her novel 'Freindship', and where the language was fluid according to region and context, this is purely pompous. Especially when his own use of 'thee and 'thou' marked him either as a hick or a Quaker, he might have done better. Some accordance of dignity, equality and longing would have been no hard reach.

Lest it be thought that I am judging the letters by modern standards, it is well to remember not simply the vivacity of Austen's letters to Cassandra but of Matthew Flinders to Ann. Look here upon this picture and on this. The first may not exactly radiate the godliness of Hyperion, but it shines with male consciousness:

You know, my dearest, that I have always dreaded the effects that the possession of great authority would have upon my temper and disposition. I am proud, unindulgent, and hasty to take offence. My mind has here been taught a lesson.¹

The second might have been written by Polonius:

Neglect not thy French nor thy music. I w'd recommend several modes of improvement to thee and particularize them. (73)

George makes his love conditional, even when Elizabeth is in the throes of worry and illness. Ann Flinders, by contrast, made her anxieties and needs known however much she stood by her husband.

The physical form of the book is designed to give that generic Estensen pleasure: compact, super-printed pages with texture and scent. She provides a map, sampler-like pages of coloured portraits and documents, precise biographical miniatures of the *dramatis personae*, and spare but pertinent notes. It might have been a good idea to print the letters by their coupling of dispatch and reception, but that would have destroyed the chronology by which we see the increasing fade-out of Bass's existence. The author has a good glass trained on the ships passing each other in the hemispherical night. We are given an accurate picture of the *Venus*, the cruelly named brig which was the bearer of disappearance and death, and even of the third rate, two decker *Mars*, a notoriously difficult vessel to trace, since it sails oddly among a class of the same name, and was actually a French prize which disappeared in the fogs of Halifax harbour on 26 June 1755, the first shipwreck of 13 year old midshipman Francis Light.

Was there something in the rivers of England's eastern watery fens which drove all three men in the direction of the great southern oceans? Or was it their schoolboy fascination with Defoe which made them so brave and so reckless? Whether they wanted it or not, war pursued them all. Trade with South America was not as easy as expected, and conjugal life depended on dreams and cunning. If Bass came out of it worst, it wasn't sheer misfortune. His letters dissimulate facts about the number of sea-faring spouses, and the points at which letters could be picked up and passed on. There seems to be always at least one more in the post than Elizabeth received, even when business letters were miraculously delivered.

Without turning Bass into one of the little diemens who inhabited the island above the strait that bears his name, it is clear that he did not love his Bess with the desperate passion which made her own life such a tragedy of waiting. One of the paradoxes of his attitude is that his board-room held fresh copies of progressive texts on philosophy, science and opera, his real inamorata. He even had the works of Mary Wollstonecraft.

It is to Estensen's credit that she lays out these contradictions firmly in the text and notes. In some of the allusions one can easily read an unspoken mercantile plot with the Waterhouse men in which the marriage was intended to serve their speculations as much as their affections. In both epistles and appendices, the

¹ Matthew Flinders, *Private Journal*, ed. Anthony J. Brown & Gillian Dooley (Adelaide: Friends of the State Library of South Australia) xxv.

connections with the East India Company through the Palmers and Alexander Dalrymple particularly engaged my own research interests. There will be many others taken by the fortunes of the Macarthurs and the early governors of New South Wales. These gambles towards piecing together the manner in which Australia was entering a global exchange are vital to our history. The Seven Years War was effectively the first world war, and reverberated from Quebec to Pondicherry. In this, her fifth venture, Estensen is a crucial player at the green baize tables. All she needs is a wariness about publishers bearing blurbs about 'a passionate and extraordinary love affair carried out across two different oceans and two very different worlds.' We need to recognize that it is an all too familiar tale of men and women in an increasingly similar network of uncovered maps. As Australians we best negotiate our cultural history by recognizing its relation to what was already becoming the planet's.

Noel Purdon