

The Legend of Eliza Frazer — A Survey of The Sources

by Elaine Brown

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This is not yet another version of what really happened to the survivors of the wreck of the *Stirling Castle* but an exercise which is long overdue, tracing systematically the history of the story itself, looking at both primary and secondary sources, neither arguing about details¹ nor avoiding the issue in desperation.

On the night of 21 May 1836, the *Stirling Castle*, a large, two-masted, square-rigged sailing ship commanded by Captain James Fraser, struck a reef off the Queensland coast, forcing the eighteen men and one woman who survived to take to the lifeboats and head southwards for the nearest settlement at Moreton Bay.

The two boats became separated, one coming ashore in northern New South Wales. Only one man survived the walk south, picked up at the Macleay River by a passing ship and taken to Sydney.

After the second boat landed at Orchid Beach on Fraser Island, its twelve castaways set out to walk south to Moreton Bay. Eleven weeks after the wreck, three exhausted crew members reached Bribie Island. Charles Otter, an officer of the Moreton Bay garrison, immediately volunteered to lead a rescue expedition. The spectacular success of this foray into unknown and dangerous territory was due to the trust between Otter and his convict guide, John Graham, who had previously lived for six years with the Wide Bay Aborigines.

Two crew members were located at Lake Cooroibah, the second mate on Fraser Island, and, lastly and most importantly, the Captain's wife, Eliza Fraser, was taken from a large gathering of Aborigines at Lake Cootharaba. The other five castaways, including the captain and the first mate, had died.

I first learned of this tragedy in *The Romance of the Great Barrier Reef*² when I was a 13-year-old, living in Maryborough and visiting Fraser Island in my father's boat. There is not much romance in the story, but it has all the elements of popular appeal: novelty, intrigue,

courage, despair, mystery, horror, and racial and inter-personal conflict. From the time the first reports appeared in the *Sydney Gazette*³ the wreck of the *Stirling Castle* was on its way to becoming an Australian legend, comparable with — those of Ned Kelly, Burke and Wills or Lindy Chamberlain.⁴

During the nineteenth century a pile of diverse and contradictory material began to accumulate. The gloss of legend has caused some writers to declare that what really happened can never be known.

I prefer a more rational approach. There are complex but quite comprehensible reasons why the story has become so clouded in mystery. Much of the confusion could be cleared away by a rigorous re-examination of all available primary sources, taking into account the physical and social environments in which events occurred, and the culture of the Aborigines who received the castaways. The first question to ask of any version — historical or fictional — is:

Which sources did this writer have access to?

The second is:

Did the writer visit Fraser Island and Cooloola to test the tale in the environment where it happened?

The third question is only now being given the recognition it deserves:

What did the writer know about the Aboriginal people into whose ancient homeland the ghosts' from the Stirling Castle so reluctantly and so fatally intruded?

Creative artists seem to me to have had more integrity than historians. Take, for example, two of our greatest visionaries — the painter Sidney Nolan and the writer Patrick White — who both produced notable works inspired by the shipwreck and its aftermath.

Sidney Nolan visited Fraser Island in 1947 and worked on a series of paintings, using the island as a background. He consulted the earliest “historical” account, John Curtis’s *The Shipwreck of the Stirling Castle*⁵, a book published in London in 1838, and Henry Stuart Russell’s reminiscences, *Genesis of Queensland*⁶ published fifty years later. Nolan, who was fascinated with the solitary white woman’s relationship with the Australian landscape, exhibited thirty new Eliza Fraser paintings in London in 1957 and later produced a few more.⁷

Some of these paintings are ‘gross!’⁸ There is nothing subtle about them, with images of Europeans isolated in alien cultural and physical landscapes, but, as I have come to realise, they faithfully represent the environments where the events of the Eliza Fraser story occurred.

I remember passing through a paperbark swamp in Cooloola late one winter's afternoon. As the grey light filtered down through the trees, my husband, with a shock of recognition, exclaimed, "Nolan's painting!" Recently, after studying his painting of Lake Wabby on Fraser Island, we went there and marvelled at how well he had captured the brilliant colours of lake and sea and sandblow.

Nolan introduced the story to Patrick White, who visited Fraser Island twice — in 1961 and 1974 — and was profoundly affected by its beauty and atmosphere. The novel *The Eye of the Storm*⁹ for which he won the 1973 Nobel Prize for Literature, is partly set on Fraser Island, and his 1976 novel, *A Fringe of Leaves*¹⁰ is loosely based on Eliza Fraser's experiences. Each book pits a defenceless woman against the power of raw nature in a crisis that becomes the pivotal point of her personal development.

Reading *Fringe of Leaves*, you become aware that White, who always carried out thorough research into the background of his novels, also used Curtis and Russell as his sources. Producing a work of fiction, he made no attempt to bring to life the "real" Eliza Fraser, but created a very different woman as his central character, Ellen Roxburgh.

The most outstanding aspect of his writing, however, is his feeling for the natural environment. I visited Indian Head, just south of where the longboat came ashore, and was amazed at the accuracy of this description:

Round them shimmered the light, the sand, and farther back, the darker, proprietary trees. Where the beach rose higher, to encroach on the forest, great mattresses of sand, far removed from the attention of the tides, were quilted and buttoned down by vines, a variety of convolvulus, its furled trumpets of a pale mauve.¹¹

Unfortunately the need to authenticate the setting has not troubled most of the historians who have tried to come to grips with the stories of the *Stirling Castle* survivors. Sitting in libraries and archives, they have sifted the often contradictory evidence without testing their theories where the drama actually occurred. Further, they have uncritically mixed primary and secondary sources without realising the importance of first analysing the primary documents in the order in which they were created. This quickly establishes where changes crept into the story. Many have happily made assertions without revealing where their information came from.

As a result of this lack of sound scholarship, the events of 1836 have been subjected to 150 years of gratuitous re-interpretations, which have then been distorted, sometimes almost beyond recognition, in numerous popular publications.

I freely admit that historians have faced several genuine problems:

- the difficulty of locating all available primary sources, especially the earliest documents relating to the story;
- dealing with the “red herrings” laid across the trail during the nineteenth century; and
- coming to terms with the effects that the reporting of Eliza Fraser’s ordeal had upon black-white relations from the moment she began to tell her tale.

The earliest documents, statements by three of the *Stirling Castle* survivors — Eliza Fraser herself, John Baxter, the Second Mate, and Joseph Corralis, the Negro steward — were written and signed a few weeks after their arrival in Brisbane.¹²

At the same time, the officer who led the rescue party, Lieutenant Charles Otter, the Moreton Bay Commandant, Captain Foster Fyans, and the convict who actually rescued four of the survivors, John Graham, wrote letters outlining their parts in the action.¹³ (I am sure the interpretation of John Graham’s letter would be enhanced were it possible to hear the Irishman dictating it.)

These official documents were sent to Sydney and filed as government records, uncovered a century later in the archives of New South Wales. The public of the time had only colourful journalistic versions of the wreck and the rescue published in the *Sydney Gazette* as events unfolded.

The convict rescuer, John Graham, eventually returned to Sydney, received his pardon and passed into oblivion. He was not interviewed by the press but his name and role remained firmly documented in Baxter’s and Eliza’s words in the *Sydney Gazette* and in Otter’s and Fyans’s official but hidden reports.

Back at Moreton Bay, several convicts who had been at large during 1836 later claimed that they had assisted in the rescues. The first was Samuel Derrington, who, after nine years in the bush, returned to Moreton Bay just after the *Stirling Castle* survivors had departed for Sydney.¹⁴ Commandant Fyans disbelieved him and he had to serve out his fourteen-year sentence. Since Graham had gone to Sydney, Derrington became Otter’s guide on two further expeditions to Wide Bay during 1837 to check rumours of shipwrecks. In May Derrington helped Otter bring back the absconder David Bracewell.¹⁵ Two months later, after the arrival in Brisbane of survivors from the *Duke of York*, he and Otter were sent back to Wide Bay to recover the bodies of a man and a boy.¹⁶

Bracewell’s claim to have assisted in the rescue of Eliza Fraser was, fortuitously, accepted, and in view of the long-running controversy

that followed, it is important to examine how it arose. There is, so far, no evidence that Bracewell spoke to Fyans about Eliza Fraser after his return with Otter and Derrington in 1837, but even if he did, like Derrington, he was probably not believed. He absconded again in 1839, returning with the Petrie-Russell expedition in 1842. On this occasion, Dr Stephen Simpson recorded his movements but made no mention of the *Stirling Castle* castaways.¹⁷

There is no doubt, however, that Bracewell told Andrew Petrie and Henry Stuart Russell that he and he alone had rescued Eliza Fraser — and that they believed him. How was it that such a startling version could gain such credence only six years after the events?

The explanation is quite simple. By 1842, the soldiers and convicts who had taken part in the events had long left Moreton Bay and there was no one to contradict Petrie and Russell when they accepted Bracewell's plausible story. About the time of Andrew Petrie's arrival in Brisbane in 1837, Fyans resigned and went to Victoria and Otter transferred with his regiment to India.¹⁸ By the time Stephen Simpson arrived in 1841 and Henry Stuart Russell in 1842, Brisbane was an empty penal colony where a few hundred people waited anxiously for Governor Gipps to declare a free settlement. It had never had a newspaper, and all documents relating to its administration were lodged in Sydney.

When dealing with Bracewell's version, it is important to note that three sources — the journals kept by Petrie and Russell on their voyage to Wide Bay, and Russell's *Genesis of Queensland* — laid the foundations for Bracewell's claims. Russell's journal describes Bracewell's arrival at Noosa on 6 May 1842 in some detail, but makes no mention of his rescuing Eliza Fraser.¹⁹ In Andrew Petrie's journal of the same event, however, Bracewell's claim is firmly established:

A few miles inland from one of these lakes, Mrs Frazer (wife of Captain Frazer, of the *Stirling Castle*) was rescued from the blacks by Bracefield, and conveyed to the boats which were anchored at the same place where we encamped.²⁰

Forty-five years later, when Russell came to write his reminiscences, he was living in England and his early years in Queensland had become a romantic dream. Events described briefly and factually in his journal were re-told with gusto, and events not mentioned in either his or Petrie's journal were added. Bracewell's claim to have rescued Eliza Fraser was fully developed and supported with evidence. Russell was sure that the story was credible:

Speaking to him as I did day by day, watching for contradictions... I became impressed with the persuasion that he had not made up a story in this, nor any other instance where I was seeking the truth. I

believed him... his excitement, manner, words were too natural to be assumed for any concealment's sake...²¹

It is interesting to compare Russell's account with another history of Queensland written for the 1888 Centenary. In *The Picturesque Atlas of Australia*, the journalist W.H. Traill mentioned the Petrie-Russell expedition to Wide Bay and the change of name from Great Sandy to Frazer's Island, but was vague and inaccurate about the wreck of the *Stirling Castle*, saying that "the exact particulars of the incident have not been preserved to us". Readers were treated to yet another of those layers of inaccuracy that had already begun to cover the original events:

The Captain (Frazer), his wife, and most of the crew, if not all, escaped from the waves only to meet with a fate worse than drowning. The natives fell upon them, slew them and probably ate them, reserving the unhappy woman for the gratification of other appetites. She remained for, it is said, eighteen months, the slave and bondswoman of these savages, degraded by them beneath even the level of their own females. Intelligence of her existence at last penetrated to the settlement, and a boat party was despatched in an endeavour to rescue her. This was successfully accomplished, the woman being assisted to escape by a convict absconder named Graham, who had been for twelve years living with the blacks.²²

Graham's role was the only accurate part of this account, yet when *Genesis of Queensland* was published in the same year, it firmly established a belief that Bracewell was the rescuer of Eliza Fraser. The publication in 1904 of Tom Petrie's *Reminiscences of Early Queensland*, which contained extracts from Russell's book and Andrew Petrie's journal, confirmed Bracewell's claim and, especially in Queensland, seemed to settle the matter. The Petries and Stuart Russell were prominent and respected men, and if they believed Bracewell, others were disposed to believe them. Inconsistencies in Bracewell's account, such as his statement to Petrie that Eliza Fraser was conveyed to the boats at Noosa and to Russell that he and Eliza had reached the outskirts of Brisbane together,²³ were not identified until much later, when the official records were rediscovered. The question of whether Bracewell played a role in the rescue remains to this day a tantalising problem.

Another early misconception was the belief that Eliza Fraser was the sole survivor. This error has been often repeated, and even by Patrick White's biographer, David Marr, in 1991.²⁴ The length of time she was with the Aborigines has also been exaggerated. Traill, for example, suggested eighteen months. In fact, three months elapsed between shipwreck and rescue, five weeks were spent at sea and seven ashore, and for only five to six weeks of this time was she living with Aboriginal groups on Fraser Island and in Cooloola.

I now turn to some of the sources that flowed from the pens of enthusiastic authors in the years following 1836. After Eliza returned to England in 1837 with her new husband, Captain Alexander Greene, their attempts to gain financial advantage by playing on the sympathy of the English public led to a scandal and an inquiry. John Curtis, a journalist who had invented his own system of shorthand, attended the public hearings, copied down the evidence verbatim and reported the case in the *Times*. Having also carried out a little research of his own, he published an account sympathetic to the survivors — *The Shipwreck of the Stirling Castle*.

This book, illustrated with a map of eastern Australia, attractive portraits of Eliza Fraser and John Baxter and engravings drawn by an artist who had never been to Australia, laid the foundation for the legend. Curtis made the most of his opportunity to produce a new Robinson Crusoe. He was dealing with a true tale of shipwreck in an exotic setting on an unexplored Pacific shore; a cast of exceptional characters — the crew of a merchant ship, the Captain's lady, cruel savages, red-coated soldiers and an heroic runaway convict — and a story with unlimited possibilities for conflict, tragedy and pathos.

It is unfortunate that *The Shipwreck of the Stirling Castle* has never been reprinted. Read carefully, and with an understanding of the controversies that have surrounded the story since its publication, the book is an excellent source of information, not only of matters relating to the shipwreck, but also of the customs of the Fraser Island and Cooloola Aborigines, however distorted the view of them might be. Allowance must be made for exaggerations and melodramatic moments and for glaring inconsistencies which arose because some chapters were written as developments in Eliza's case overtook Curtis's earlier presumptions. It is also necessary to keep in mind the author's intentions and limitations and the tastes and dispositions of his audience.

Unlike Russell, Curtis knew nothing of the environment in which the events had taken place. Though he listened carefully to the eye-witness accounts of Eliza Fraser, the second mate John Baxter and Robert Darge (one of the seamen who gave evidence at the inquiry), he sometimes misunderstood or misinterpreted what he was told. His geographical background, especially, is vague, and although Baxter clearly understood where they had been, the exact locations where events took place are sometimes difficult to determine. Whereas the embroidered episodes of Russell's adventures in Wide Bay take place in recognisable locations, the strongly delineated characters in Curtis's drama perform their roles against an almost surrealistic backdrop.

Back in Sydney, press accounts of the shipwreck were synthesised for a chapter in Australia's first children's book, *A Mother's Offering to her Children*, written by "A Lady Long Resident in New South Wales" and printed by the *Sydney Gazette* in 1841. The text is in the form of a rather mannered conversation between Mrs S. and her children, Julius, Emma, Clara and Lucy. The dates and events mentioned are tediously detailed, but some idea of the tone of the work can be gained from Clara's exclamation on hearing of the death of the mate, Mr Brown:

Such wanton barbarities fill one with horror and indignation; and a wish to exterminate the perpetrators, of such dreadful cruelties.²⁵

Thus emerged the third problem historians have faced in dealing with the fates of the *Stirling Castle* survivors: the mutually hostile attitudes subsequently assumed by both the Wide Bay Aborigines and the Europeans who learned of their supposed "wanton barbarities" through the world-wide publicity given to Eliza Fraser's story. An undercurrent of what the poet Judith Wright calls "the fear as old as Cain"²⁶ runs through most European accounts, while descendants of the Aborigines still resent the way their ancestors' attempts to adopt the castaways have been misrepresented.

Eliza's tale reached North America in 1837 as a pamphlet entitled *Narrative of the Capture, Sufferings and Miraculous Escape of Mrs Eliza Fraser*²⁷ For American consumption, the illustrator dressed the Aborigines in loincloths, tunics, hose and feather head-dresses, and gave them tomahawks, daggers and bows and arrows.

American interest continued with the publication in *Knickerbocker* magazine of an account by Henry Youlden, one of the three seamen who had managed to walk south to report the wreck and send a rescue party back to the other survivors.²⁸ Youlden had an intense dislike for Eliza Fraser, calling her a "she-captain" and a "very vixen". His version added to the doubts about her character which the London investigation had raised. Apart from some questionable details which can be explained as deliberate attempts to portray his own actions in a favourable light, or as lapses of memory in the seventeen-year interval between the events and their recall, this account, when matched against those of other survivors, appears to be authentic. The date of its publication — 1853 — is significant. Having heard of the rich gold discoveries in Australia, Americans were thirsty for information about these remote colonies.

The controversy about who actually rescued Eliza Fraser began in earnest with the publication of Russell's *Genesis of Queensland* in 1888 based on his own experiences with David Bracewell and the early accounts in the *Sydney Gazette*, where the rescues were reported to have been carried out by "a person named Graham".²⁹ "Who was

this Graham?” Russell asked. “Such a name never reached our ears.” He was, however, prepared to concede that “one record alone perhaps could settle the question, viz., Lieutenant Otter’s own report of the event, if there be any in existence”.³⁰

It seems that Russell, though living in England in 1838, was not aware of Curtis’s book, which details Graham’s role and reproduces a letter written by Otter to a cousin in England with a version of the rescue party’s activities similar to that contained in his official account — the vital document which lay dormant in the archives of New South Wales for another fifty years.

Russell’s recollections had a powerful influence on the negative attitudes many writers have taken towards Eliza Fraser’s character. Referring to the scandal of 1837, which he called her “imposition upon the Londoners, which I shrink from explaining but recollect well”, he painted a word picture so graphic that it has become an integral part of the legend:

Walking from Hyde Park down Oxford-street, I observed a man who was carrying over his shoulder one of those show advertisements: a large wooden square frame nailed to the end of a long pole. On the calico with which it was covered was a bright coloured daub which represented savages with bows and arrows, some dead bodies of white men and women, which other savages were cutting up on the ground, and another squad was holding on “spits” to a large fire. It was amusing enough to stop me in my walk: horrible enough to impress the writing beneath this picture on my mind, “*Stirling Castle*’ wrecked on the coast of New Holland, Botany Bay, all killed and eaten by savages: only survivor, a woman, to be seen, 6d. admission”.³¹

There is every possibility that Russell, whose family lived at Hanover Square, saw such a sign. In the summer of 1837, when Eliza Fraser was the talk of London, he was in his last year at Harrow School. But notice that he described only the advertisement: he did not claim to have seen the exhibit, so we have only an inference that it was the real Eliza on display. Russell’s is the only evidence we have that this side-show actually existed, yet many writers have imaginatively capitalised on its possibilities, such as Michael Alexander, writing in 1971:

With her captain checking receipts in the background, we can imagine her sitting in some crude booth against a painted tropic backcloth, perhaps exposing her more available scars to a prurient public and declaiming a lurid summary of her misadventures.³²

Peter Sculthorpe wrote a piece of musical theatre called “Mrs Fraser Sings”, produced in 1977. The epilogue is set in a show booth in Hyde Park, London where a spruiker calls all to see:

Eliza Survivor
 Hear her Adventures
 Shipwreck and Ravages
 Hear her for Sixpence
 Sav-ed from Savages...³³

During the century following Russell's publication, controversy continued to flourish. In 1930, for example, the *Brisbane Courier* reported the research of Professor Cumbrae Stewart of the University of Queensland. Hoping to find proof of who had rescued Eliza Fraser, he had consulted the files of the *Sydney Gazette*; of the Maryborough pioneer, Edward Armitage, who produced a letter from Lt. Otter to refute some of Russell's statements; and of Tom Welsby, the respected Brisbane historian, who offered his copy of Curtis to settle the matter.³⁴

Then, in 1937, to commemorate the centenary of the wreck, the English writer and artist Robert Gibbings published *John Graham, Convict*, a well-researched account, illustrated with the author's own attractive woodcuts. Concentrating as he did on Graham's part in the rescue, Gibbings did not follow the Eliza Fraser story further than 1836, but he clarified some of the issues which had become confused over the years by unearthing, in the Mitchell Library in Sydney, the official records and correspondence relating to the *Stirling Castle* survivors, including Lt. Otter's report. Unfortunately, although he used many original documents in his work, he did not cite their sources. In a postscript, however, he commented:

The author's attention was first directed to this narrative by a highly coloured account of Mrs Fraser's sufferings, written by her contemporary, John Curtis. In following up the subject it has appeared that at least one other convict, by name Bracefell (Henry Stuart Russell, *Genesis of Queensland*), and probably others, have claimed the honour of rescuing Mrs Fraser; but, as has been seen from the official papers, there can be no question whatever but that John Graham was the hero of the occasion.³⁵

In spite of Gibbings's discovery of the official documents, writers of popular accounts continued to present a very wide range of versions, depending on which sources they had access to. There was more mileage in maintaining the mystery than in solving it. The chapter "White Woman Among Cannibals" in Charles Barrett's *White Blackfellows*, published in Melbourne in 1948, is typical. Although he criticised Curtis for being unable to tell "a plain, unvarnished tale" and Russell for "rambling", Barrett simply selected what he needed from their narratives, adding a little more confusion in his re-telling.³⁶

Queensland's centenary in 1959 drew public attention to historical romance and Sir Raphael Cilento and Clem Lack published an article and a book with the title, *Wild White Men* in which they recounted the stories of a number of castaways and runaways, as well as the rescue of Eliza Fraser. Their account attempted to dovetail the official Graham version with the Bracewell version, but, though they were specific about places, naming Double Island Point and Teewah, they did not suggest how the overall feat was accomplished and they ignored some information in order to achieve their synthesis.³⁷

In 1971, after extensive research from British, Australian and New Zealand sources, another English writer, Michael Alexander, produced *Mrs Fraser on the Fatal Shore*, the first comprehensive account of the shipwreck and its aftermath since Curtis's work of 1838. This "factionalised" but entertaining narrative takes the reader from 1835, when the *Stirling Castle* left London, to the supposed death of Eliza Fraser in Melbourne in 1858. Alexander gives sufficient historical and cultural background to be convincing, and, taking no viewpoint for granted, he deals fully with the Graham/Bracewell controversy, concluding that, "beyond reasonable doubt ... the convict John Graham rescued Mrs Fraser and others from the *Stirling Castle* and fairly earned his reward and release". However, he notes

the theory, which has crystallised into local acceptance, that Graham's account of the rescue, for all its convincing circumstances, does not tell the whole story, and that Mrs Fraser's salvation involved another convict living with the Aborigines at the time, named Bracefell.³⁸

His work has two weaknesses. Firstly, although there are thirteen useful appendices and many explanatory footnotes, there is no list of sources and no index. As a consequence, Alexander has left himself wide open to the criticisms heaped upon his interpretations by researchers like Yolanda Drummond. Secondly, although Alexander spent a week at Orchid Beach Resort in the north of Fraser Island, he appears to have made no attempt to explore Cooloola in order to locate the sites where the rescues he describes might have taken place. The result is a map on the endpapers of his book where almost every event is placed at a geographically impossible spot.

During the 1970s, as the campaigns of conservationists drew public attention to Fraser Island and Cooloola, interest in the Eliza Fraser story increased. In a bout of "media hype", the story was trivialised, distorted and re-written as "a Rollicking Tale of Lust and Adventure ... from the Violent, Bawdy Colonial Past" by Australian author Kenneth Cook. His fictionalised version, based upon David Williamson's script for a B-grade feature film made by Tim Burstall in 1976,³⁹ did nothing to cut through the accretions of doubt and confusion that the story had accumulated over the years.

Indeed the complacency expressed in the introduction to Cook's *Eliza Fraser* is as outrageous as his version of the tale:

... to date there has been no real consensus and the most meticulous historian, on the evidence, could not arrive at a position which he could honestly say was beyond dispute.⁴⁰

After the establishment of Cooloolo National Park in 1975, local historians, assisted by officers of the Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Service, began to investigate its human history. In 1979, Douglas Jolly, a member of the Royal Historical Society, requested the Gympie and District Historical Society to investigate the possible sites in Cooloolo from which Eliza Fraser may have been rescued, as he wished to place a commemorative plaque in a suitable location. This task was undertaken by Gympie historian Neil Buchanan, who, unlike every researcher who had considered the story before him, had a thorough knowledge of the geography of the area concerned.

Like Alexander, he gave serious thought to the conflicting claims that either Graham or Bracewell alone had rescued Eliza Fraser. Graham was undoubtedly the official rescuer, and an account that assumed Bracewell was lying could be fitted to the facts. However, since every time Graham effected a rescue he was entirely on his own in the bush, it was not impossible that he had contacted Bracewell and arranged for him to deliver Mrs Fraser to Graham's Aboriginal "relatives" at Lake Cootharaba. On this assumption, and using statements from Graham's, Bracewell's and Eliza Fraser's accounts, Buchanan worked out how such a manoeuvre might have been carried out within the constraints of time and place.⁴¹

Careful perusal of Graham's and Otter's statements convinced Buchanan that Otter's rescue party had waited on Teewah Beach near the spot where a track enters and crosses the low dunes that separate Lake Cootharaba from the ocean. Here, behind the dunes, lies a lagoon, which broadens into a lake-side swamp. On the beach itself, outcrops of coffee rock are sometimes exposed, and fresh water flows out from under the sandy cliffs nearby. All these features are mentioned in the primary sources.

Following Graham's description, and considering the time he needed to walk to the camp where Eliza Fraser was held, talk at length with the Aborigines and then transport his prize back to Teewah Beach, Buchanan suggested that the camp was at Fig Tree Point, a slightly elevated sandstone outcrop where the Noosa River enters Lake Cootharaba. This spot, now a picturesque picnic ground for the operators of river cruises, is sheltered, close to paperbark swamps, accessible to food and fresh water, and large enough to host a tribal gathering. The vaguely-worded stone memorial to Eliza Fraser was

eventually located on the lake side further south at Boreen Point, where, presumably, more tourists will appreciate it.

During the 1970s and 1980s, academic as well as amateur historians began to take an interest in the Eliza Fraser story. The work of J.G. Steele, whose annotated books of original documents revealed the rich supply of primary sources available to researchers, promoted the idea that nothing less than a thorough re-examination would cut through the crust of folklore that had grown up around much of Queensland's early history.⁴²

Beginning with Jan Walker's 1975 study of Aboriginal history in the Maryborough district,⁴³ a strong interest in traditional Aboriginal culture and the history of black-white contact in Wide Bay has developed. In 1976, she and Ray Evans published an influential article entitled "These strangers, where are they going?," expanding on the history of black-white contact around Maryborough and Fraser Island. Unfortunately, when dealing with Eliza Fraser, they based their account mainly on Alexander rather than on the primary documents, and thus missed some of the story's significance.⁴⁴

During the 1970s, investigations into aspects of Aboriginal experience in south-east Queensland using primary sources resulted in useful studies of the resources and settlement patterns of the Aborigines of Fraser Island⁴⁵ and the bunya feasts of south-east Queensland.⁴⁶ Archaeological investigations which have produced new insights into Aboriginal culture and subsistence were begun on Fraser Island during the 1970s by Dr Peter Lauer,⁴⁷ and were continued in Cooloola during the 1980s by Dr Ian McNiven.⁴⁸

The year 1986 was the 150th anniversary of the wreck of the *Stirling Castle*. Neil Buchanan and the President of the Cooroora Historical Society, Barry Dwyer, produced a book to put forward interpretations which, for the first time, took into consideration the geography of the areas where the rescues of Eliza Fraser and the other survivors took place and viewed the whole episode in the context of black-white cultural differences. A set of relevant, early documents was appended to this book, making it useful for people who want easy access to the primary sources.⁴⁹

The 1980s also saw the beginning of long-overdue analyses of the ways in which Eliza Fraser and her story have been treated. In 1983, J.S. Ryan published "The Several Fates of Eliza Fraser", a survey of historical versions of the story, such as those of Robert Gibbings and Michael Alexander, and creative interpretations, such as Tim Burstall's film and the fiction of Patrick White and Kenneth Cook. Ryan summed up the current situation succinctly when he described the Eliza Fraser legend as "... a strange farrago of fiction, faction, fable and film ..."⁵⁰

Recently, Dr Kay Schaffer, a student of the history and status of women, has published articles which analyse how Eliza Fraser was used by the media of her time to perpetuate cultural myths. Her work is putting the Eliza Fraser story into the international context of colonialism and securing its place in the history of ideas as well as the history of experiences.⁵¹

Thus in recent decades the Eliza Fraser story has left the exclusive province of history and become a source for scholars in many other disciplines. It is immaterial to them whether Graham or Bracewell rescued the *Stirling Castle* castaways. Homing in on the primary sources, they use eye-witness observations to advance insights and support interpretations in their particular fields of knowledge and they apply a rigour to their arguments that has been lacking in the efforts of most writers who took an historical perspective, at least until fairly recently.

Creative artists, following the example of Nolan, White, Burstall and Sculthorpe, have selected what they needed from historical reconstructions in order to explore the place of the Eliza Fraser legend in the broader Australian culture. Gillian Coote's unusual documentary film, *Island of Lies*, for example, deals unashamedly with the short and long term effects Eliza's stories have had on European perceptions of Aborigines. She urges Australians to confront such unpleasant aspects of their history as the demise of the Aborigines and the manner of their destruction. Her film begins and ends with a play, *Eliza*, written by Allan Marott in the style of a Japanese Noh drama. The film-maker takes the Noh theme as the starting point of her investigation:

An ordinary traveller meets a masked ghost figure trapped by its past, by its greed, ignorance and lies, and through the challenge of this encounter, the ghost is liberated.⁵²

The ghost in both the play and the film is Eliza Fraser. The tangled web of, at best misunderstanding and at worst malice, which she and others began to spin in 1836, has since caught many victims, including Eliza herself. Unravelling the threads of this complex piece of history will be no easy task, but, in fairness to all who have been trapped in its sticky net, a review of all the evidence, starting with the primary sources, taking the environment into account and balancing Aboriginal and European perspectives, is, I believe, a challenge that Queensland historians need to accept.

ENDNOTES

1. Yolanda Drummond, "The Progress of Eliza Fraser", Royal Historical Society of Queensland *Journal*, Vol. XV, No.1, Feb. 1993.

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