

Landscapes: the Journal of the International Centre for Landscape and Language

Volume 2 | Issue 1

Article 6

2013

A Visit From Home

Barbara York Main

Recommended Citation

Main, B. Y. (2003). A Visit From Home. *Landscapes: the Journal of the International Centre for Landscape and Language*, 2(1). Retrieved from <http://ro.ecu.edu.au/landscapes/vol2/iss1/6>

This Short Story is posted at Research Online.
<http://ro.ecu.edu.au/landscapes/vol2/iss1/6>

A Visit From Home

Barbara York Main
November 2003

Landfall was sudden. There materialised abruptly, a jetty, a clutter of sheds, a promenade backed by a line of low, solid, stone buildings and some strange assertive trees. This southern continent tipped unsteadily. Only the trees, grey barked and dingily cowed, suggested an uneasy balance and fixity.

Then the train, both tedious and restful. Of course southern distances were nothing new. Not through all their various sojourns. Yet she had hoped for a pleasanter place. Something greener, gentler, leafier. Not anywhere amongst the spines, thorns, twigs, aborted leaves of these strange plants could she detect a generous shoot. Was it from this dry dreariness of sombre scrub that her boys were to wrench a living? Convert a bastardly bushland into bushels of grain? And Elspeth beside her, could this land accommodate her aspirations? "Oh I'm sure it will be more comfortable where the farms are" was all Elspeth could hope. Her mother remembered her boys their smooth faces, clear eyes, unroughened hands. There had been letters. "A countryside like Huntingdonshire but of course with bigger fields". The women pulled their hat scarves across their faces against the draughts, coal smut and grit, and the wilderness of cold, uncompromising scrub.

A tiny wooden station with gravel platform. An island of mock civilisation and security. In endless bush. And two young men. Her boys! The dark moustaches! And my goodness, the collarless shirts! She was comfortably pleased for the box of new collars she had remembered to put in the trunk. Sun burnt faces, but unmistakably her boys. A dignified, restrained and slightly bashful greeting ensued, Elspeth the most uncontrolled, rummaging for a linen handkerchief.

A cart had been borrowed to transport the mother and sister. And so began the long, slow, plodding journey through scrub and woodland until darkness and the weariness of weeks wrapped the two women in a jolting sleep.

Looking about the makeshift house, built specially for the visit – the gimlet-poled walls lined with white-washed hessian – she knew at once what had to be done. Some sense of nicety must be instilled. When she and Elspeth were gone again there must remain order, not just of hygiene but of solid domesticity, of comfort and pleantry. Curtains, a woven mat, a damask tablecloth and cups

with matching saucers, a stove with a polished oven door. So long in tents, hessian beds (no sheets! it was as well they had brought the extra linen to leave behind) the boys had all but forgotten the genteel, quiet, *essential* comforts of life. Or had they? They spoke so little about the discomforts and scarcely asked about or remarked on the household in England – never questioned where or what had happened to anyone, even the cousins. They were already apart. She walked outside, shading her eyes against the light bouncing off the new, shiny tank. Enough water now, yes even for the meagre, daily tub. But for laundry it was taboo. And as gentlewomen they were neither of them familiar with the wash house, copper and troughs which had become part of the life for the few women living here on the remote farms. At length an arrangement was come to with a family, glad in their need even for trivial recompense, to take on such simple chores.

She continued her surveillance of the wheat, their first crop sandwiched between the timbered flats and stony rises. In this “new” soil, so recently appropriated from an evolution stretching back for aeons, there were harbouring, as yet, no weeds, no pests. The grain planted, it grew and burst luxuriantly into head. Watching it with quiet expectation, they could not foresee rising salt, choking weeds or grubs, or even an uncertainty of seasons. She opened the fowl yard gate and let the fowls run free, to scratch in the undergrowth and shrubs close-by beneath the nameless trees. She gathered four eggs and removed leaves and twigs from the water tin. The Boys would be back soon – from digging, with the horses and an improvised scoop, a dam.

At night, in the cold stillness, the thin mournful dirge of the curlews or the plaintive cries of plovers made them long for solid walls and furniture where no such sounds could penetrate. Like something physical, the terrible bird notes racked the night and cleaved their insubstantial shelter. As if an omen, that would drive them away.

But in the morning, in the cheerfulness of light, magpies and peewits, their calls so much kinder, even melodious, offered acceptance of their presence.

Forgetting the chilling sounds of the night she arranged sprays of yellow orchids and deep purple flowers in a jar and placed it on the shelves of stacked boxes that did nicely for a dresser. And flipped over the pages of some magazines and books they had brought. There was so little though, for the boys to read. What did they think about all day while they were working? As days stretched into weeks and months. What in fact was she to think about, or Elspeth, as the weeks passed.

They would go to church. The brothers harnessed up the horse. "How long since we've been to church?" they asked each other across the shafts of the spring cart while remembering the chill of school chapels, the sonorous boredom of cathedrals. Well the iron hall would be a change – one wondered about the acoustics. What would that succession of Very Reverends think of their present alienation, their drift away? As if it mattered.

Elspeth and their mother, strengthened with prayer books, corsets and velvet-covered hats, climbed into the cart. On the way, passing some lean-to huts in the bush, they stared, then cast away their eyes and maybe some uncharitable thoughts. "Natives", exclaimed Elspeth, her missionary zeal suddenly rising from memories of good works in the slums. But no these poor creatures were not to be encompassed by her. She was already committed, shortly to take up a position for six months at a School for Young Ladies.

This small congregation of dour, guarded families, in noticing the two austere, carefully dressed women – the hats, the brooches, the firm straight backs and confident singing (it was hinted that the daughter, the sister taught music to young children, that she was a governess or teacher at a school for "young ladies") – wondered had they, some of them, perhaps slighted the brothers by not openly taking them into their homes, having instead treated them with a distance due to common workmen? How to make amends? The mother, was she offended that her sons had not been treated more generously, more hospitably?

But it was at church that their longed for socialising began. There followed, of course, polite afternoon teas with remnant, treasured crockery spread on fretting lace cloths in sitting rooms gloomy behind verandas hung with dolichos creepers. Rapport of a kind developed, necessary, even if only temporary. After all the visitors would soon be gone.

Drinking tea from the ever so slightly chipped, bone china tea cups in a cluttered sitting room, the boys recalled the uncompromising distances meted out to them in their first few years. Rain streaming off the verandah roof onto the lilies and lavender, while they, bedraggle, stood waiting, hopefully, and not without noticing the girl's brown hair and green eyed evasive glances as she came and went. But "Well boys, you can't walk back to your camp in this downpour. Better find a dry corner in the shed for the night: as the father glanced at the dismal, pole-walled shed, draughty and bleak.

Now, though, they were apparently acceptable. And in any case the very proper daughter was long since married.

Other families too, some from other states – some expatriates like themselves extended a welcome in their desperation to allay the loneliness and by proxy, experience whatever had passed at home since their departure.

The brothers had kept diaries. The mother yearned for some note of joy, some admission of satisfaction in the day by day accounts of activities, an acceptance of their place in the landscape. Through the spare phrases, perhaps, would be revealed a growing affinity with the country. But each stark staccato entry was no more than a bald statement of an activity. She was left to ponder the full meaning.

Started to clear the forest. She looked across the clearing at trees ranked to the horizon. Forest? These sinewy trees with leaves like leather and accompanied by tangles of prickly shrubs? No! But what other word did they have? Had she heard somewhere an expression like “timber”?

Put some sacks up for the sides of the shed. Such fragile shelter against even a little rain.

Soled my boots. She felt again the rough soil through her own thin, unsuitable shoes.

She felt an anxiety in *Went to Nungoolin to get some stores which we expected from Perth but they had not come.*

Remarks such as *Took a load of manure into the crop* conveyed little of the physical effort or perhaps unpleasantness of the load. But later *Sewing up bags behind the harvester* did indeed suggest the visions – or memories – they must have had. Perhaps they remembered golden barley fields swaying in the soft and genial summers.

We started to build a fowl house.

Planted some peas.

These farmyard activities persisted. Elspeth had taken over the gardening and poultry duties.

Washing, sewing etc. Such imposed self-reliance. She sorted through their worn clothes and tried to ease their dual roles of home-making and establishing a farm.

Picking up stumps and Washing in the morning.

...cut my hair...and I cut his.

Saw that the pumpkins had come up.

Picking up scrub.

Baked in the morning and got a fowl from ...and dressed it in the afternoon.

Sometimes the apparent tediousness of the days were punctuated by drama and horror as when *Saw some smoke...and ...The rolling was on fire.*

Day by day the records were of simple "house" chores mixed with gardening and strenuous work, with rare hints of the difficulty in maintaining hygiene as in *had a bath under the stand pipe.*

Only occasionally a flicker of pleasure in the records *Jason came up in the evening and played cards.* Rarely an aesthetic touch concerning what might have been considered inessentials as *fencing the drive.* And barely a recognition of wildlife, just occasionally a novel or bizarre creature was noted *...found a mountain devil... or observations of phenomena ...saw the southern borealis and thunder still about.* sometimes a note about something edible *found a mushroom patch.*

Most entries told of an activity, of a *doing* towards a single, steadfastly foreseen end – establishment of a farm which would be their source of livelihood. Over and over the reports were of clearing "forest", of burning logs, tilling ground, harvesting meagre crops, purchasing horses, cutting chaff, oiling harnesses, finding water, deepening waterholes, setting eggs, planting vegetable seeds (and noting their germination). The bare commentaries on the landscape were simply assessments of various parts as "good" or "no good" as each pertained to possible annexations.

This subdued abbreviated chronicle she gradually imbued with some kind of feeling – for the young men with their painful enclosure from the surrounding bush. Thrust alone into a unopening landscape, in their clumsy assault on it they must have conjured some image of fields (a little larger than those they remembered), perhaps bounded by lines of trees (semblances of avenues as when "*fencing the drive*") patches of scrubby thickets (reflections of copses and cutover woods). A cluster of farmyard pretences grew and the chicken coop, the stable, the plots of pumpkins and peas. But all finished, everything still so rudimentary – even perhaps their own outlook or vision.

"You will look after the fowls, won't you Hal? They are laying so well now." Elspeth and the brothers walked away from the new fowl shed which Elspeth had helped to build. "And the vegetables – Sam, the bean trellis really needs attention."

They seemed so remote, the two of them, hardly ever speaking.

And now in little more than a whisper, what was Sam saying?

"If I had the fare ... I would go. Today. Tomorrow. Go home too!" Startled, what could Elspeth say, think.

"But you are doing so well, Mother is so proud of you" she could barely gasp. "It is wonderful what you have done already, achieved so much..." But perhaps the mother did not detect the submerged

longings, disillusionments, trapped hopes behind the brave facade of reckoning with the obdurate landscape.

The stark little railway station again, and a dry goodbye to the brothers. She searched deep in their dark, shielded eyes but raised no response. It had been too long — too long *before the visit*. The boys – young men – stared at their mother's black hat (trimmed with violets), at her embroidered cambric blouse, at the pearl shell buttons, the cameo at her throat and remembered the cold, the wind, and the massive stone walls along the grey street, and the grey sullen house, the pots of flowers and herbs on the southern landing where the shafts of a weak, pale, listless sun slanted through the double windows from beyond where the town gave way to windy moors blotted with mist. Resolutely they stamped away flimsy images of spring flowers at the edge of old fields, mossy stiles over fences, cows which knew obeisance, warm fires and jocularity. They flicked the flies away and lifted the trunk, the baskets and hat boxes, into the carriage. The train lurched away. The mother looked back through a hazed window. Today was as seemingly final (for one) as the trenches of France were to be a few years later.

Elsbeth riffled through her letters for the London Girls' Friendly Society which her mother was to take home. Already she was looking forward to the post at the Girls' School, in the town down along the coast. It would be pleasant by the seaside, away from this alternately bleak and blistered bushland.

The comfortable gentleman strapped by the heavy gold watch chain into his black waistcoat, politely averted his gaze from the subdued spectacle opposite – the austere, wide-hatted woman whose flow of tears cascaded from unflickering dark eyes then splashed softly, silently on her strong-veined folded hands. Perhaps he saw more clearly but understood even less the rolling thickets of scrub and mallee, the umbrella-crowned trees, the sinuous expanse of salt lakes gleaming white and mocking dreams of hoped-for riches from adjacent rough-tilled ground.

Was it to this dreary, sunfaded, unopening, endless topography; this countryside barren of human touch; this emptiness; *this counterfeit rural landscape* that she had committed her sons? "But yes Charlotte, it is a wonderful opportunity, not to be missed, it will be the making of them – make men of them – their future, their security assured, to take up new land in Western Australia ... it is a wise investment." Such had been the advice of the Very Reverend uncles. Perhaps the worthy uncles and their kind wives had been gently curtailing the anticipated burden of a widow's ambitions for

her children. Faintly voiced hopes of further education were hushed by the generosity of assisted passages to a better life, to independence in another country. Not for the benefactors of exile, of bleak loneliness, of aching homesickness, of hopeless longings for a structured countryside. What indeed could they have known of the soulless wastes of gravel and scrub and rivers of salt? Safe within the boundaries of village walls and hedges and unchanging customs, not for them the uncertainties of a place, of a life not yet patterned or moulded. An unyielding, shapeless bush could never have been imagined by the givers (their sincerity not to be doubted) and only to be felt in its strangling hold by the young men, uncertain of even a pulse of gratitude.

She wiped her eyes and made some attempt at composure, straightened her skirt and touched the lace at her throat, frowned at the coal smut settling in the carriage. To Elspeth she mustered conversation about the boys' futures. Recalling the occasion with one of the also English families striving to retain their idea of civilised behaviour, even in a whitewashed hessian house (as like an Afghan encampment as not, although they would have been shocked to have had the similarity noted) – she pondered that "Perhaps something would come of it," referring to a suggested alliance with one of the daughters.

Elspeth too, recalled the girl with the cornflower blue eyes and wispy halo of plaited hair. But "Catholic" said the Mother, finally. To the sister, so High Church anyway, it didn't really matter – she continued riffling the Girl's Friendly Society papers, but absently, while thinking of good works to be performed, soon, at the school. *Her* life had purpose. She would educate the young colonists, instil in them values from their unknown homeland.

On the wharf, she was already turning to a grey street, stone houses and inched gardens, as she had said to Elspeth, forgetting the immediacy of six months at the seaside town, remembered and suddenly longed for the security of the papered walls, the soft lace curtains, even the grey spire across the street and its accompanying clutter of fragmented gravestones (marks of a known life and customs, even in their shattered distortion).

Feeling the steady throb of a ship as it ploughed through the sea she knew against its tug an unreeling of familial attachments. But there would be the letters again. The stumbling phrases "Dear Mother..." the half forgotten schoolboy scripts updated. But now at least she would be able to magnify the understatements with images of landscape. Her long slough of anxiety was already overlain by a personal distance that asserted a separateness of

lives. At last she was unburdened and there came a rush of new feeling even as earlier hopes of conjured opportunities for her two boys in this southern continent quivered and faded with the land's thinning line across the green choppy sea.

A soft knock on the cabin door.

"Madam your bath is ready." She bathed, dressed, and carefully pinned the topaz brooch, steadied herself along the narrow corridor. And walked boldly in to dinner – and settled amongst the pearls, satin, crepe and voile, the stiff collars and waistcoats – ready for conversation and the restrained conviviality of shipboard life.

The ship would berth, there would be the train journey northward. Through bleak sunshine she would look out over the back gardens, the vegetables and flowers and tiny lean-to glass houses, children skipping, an old man gazing at his standard roses. There would be beech woods, elms, riotous hedges and dots of flowers (escapees from backyards) along the railway. Grief already growing stale!

She would approach the solidity, security of the stone wall enclosing the tiny garden and find another daughter amongst familiar trappings - the fire in its panelled place, a tablecloth, the gleam of china and polished cutlery and windows closed and curtained against the climbing rose, the hollyhocks, the edge of the town, the long reach of moor and the night.

Back at the makeshift house set uneasily in the dishevelled, broken bush and patch of farmland, the taciturn brothers sank into their new-found luxury of canvas chairs. The vacant imprisoning distance pressed closer in the dusk. But even through the apprehension of searing loneliness they knew they could never return to that other greener, gentler, already blurred landscape. For one, whittling chips of salmon gum, sandal wood and jam tree twigs – the fragrance dispelled the musty scent of a leafy, beech-wood floor; for the other, searching through the new glass panes – the distant, high sandy slope of heath and wodjil falsified forever the lingering image of a windy moor reaching into a grey sky.