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HER VOICE WAS EVER SOFT: STORIES BY WOMEN

Agnes Melda Prince. *Esther Mary, My Pioneer Mother*. Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1981. \$4.50. 57 pp.
Eileen Haley and Lillian Rosser. *Memories of an Australian Girlhood*. Brisbane: Hecate Press, 1980. Hardback \$7.95; paperback \$4.95. 141 pp.

The most effective writing in any cause is usually the least polemical, and these two books quietly and devastatingly undermine the strongest bastions of male arrogance and female defensiveness without raising their voices above a pleasant and wryly humorous tone.

Melda Prince's little book is an account of her mother's pioneer enterprise when, in 1919, at the age of forty-seven, she took up two blocks containing about 350 acres of forest land near Pemberton in south-west Western Australia, and established there an orchard and a farm. Mrs Prince does not intend her mother's life to be used to further the cause of women's liberation and equality, it just happens to do so. But it also presents the picture of a marriage which produced seven surviving children, a marriage which, although the parents were separated physically for much of their lives, could be called satisfactory.

Agnes Mary Angus was raised on a Tasmanian orchard farm, and came with her husband, Henry Lawrence Angus, to Kalgoorlie during the gold boom. The family, with four children, then moved to Bunbury. Mrs Prince's narrative style is simple but the narrative is made complex by its understatement. Recounting, for example, the move to Bunbury, she writes:

There they had a shop built with a house behind it; Dad was to run a grocery section and Mum a drapery. She also made numerous dresses for sale, and after some time, when Dad became tired of the grocery business again, Mum was left with the running of both grocery and drapery.

The father is lovingly described, so that his appearance and his work with his fine team of draught horses come alive. One feels

that it is an innate and unquestioned sense of female equality that allowed Esther Mary to take up the reins of family maintenance and remain an understanding and loyal wife, and that inspires her daughter now to write with pride and affection of her father:

Although Dad was unable to go with us he was glad enough about us leaving Perth, as he didn't like cities either. He was the same age as Mum; tall and straight, with grey hair and a brown beard that had auburn patches in it. Although beards were just then going right out of fashion Dad kept his and, neatly trimmed, it seemed to me to give him an air of distinction. . . .

Dad was rather famous for his quiet way of handling his team. Most teamsters came to have cracked or hoarse voices but, although Dad spoke to his team in a very low voice, each horse knew its name and what all his commands meant.

It is, however, Esther Mary who astonishes one with her intelligence, energy, practical ability, compassion and commonsense. Shrewdness has nothing to do with her managerial skills nor opportunism with her foresight. Undoubtedly Esther Mary could not have been a saint, but one is inclined to feel that her daughter glosses nothing, and it seems very unlikely that she forgot very much of what she observed in the life of the family.

Mrs Prince, the author, is the youngest of the children who survived childhood, and it would be natural if the older members of the family had found their mother's determination more demanding and dominating than did Mrs Prince, but there is little indication, even for those who like to read between the lines, that this was so. Perhaps pioneering conditions and the resourcefulness and energy that characterized Agnes Mary and her children kept all the family so busy that occasions for normal family conflict were minimal.

The little tale makes one realize how extraordinarily important it is in the pursuit of happiness, either to keep very busy at a satisfying occupation, or to learn to live on little and do little, keeping well clear of the busy people. Not that in this book one sees anything of people doing little, because whatever troubles are part of pioneering life, here such a life does not seem to include the problem of under-employment or unemployment. Moreover, although throughout the early pioneering years,

Esther Mary and her family had their share of accidents, they seem to have been blessed with excellent health, and no one reading accounts of pioneers can underestimate the importance of good and bad health in determining the happiness and success of the settlers.

Not all the characters in the history are as resourceful as Esther Mary. There are the new English settlers, the Leahans, who arrived outside the Angus's two-roomed house one morning with an eighteen-year-old daughter and a dying sixteen-year-old son, and who stay. Mrs Prince narrates, "We four children slept on rugs on the floor in Mum's room." After three weeks, the Leahans having made no attempt to erect their tent on their block, Esther Mary "suggested that she thought we four children were too noisy for their son, and perhaps they would like to put up their tent at a cleared area we called Little Brook where Mum had begun a new vegetable garden." Three weeks later, the son is dead, perhaps from tuberculosis, but the Leahans had been expecting his death and eventually settle in to small farming, without immediately becoming the most amiable of neighbours.

The book also contains dozens of comments on the tools, skills, household utensils, and procedures of the pioneer years, and traces incidentally the gradual extension of transport and educational facilities to the remoter areas of south-west Western Australia. Mrs Prince had to manage with periods of schooling at a bush school and then at a convent in Bunbury, interrupted whenever "family finances reached zero . . . and back home we went." Mrs Prince and her sister did not have boarding-school accommodation, which in any case might have been irksome for such independent and capable children, but at the age of twelve, she and her fourteen-year-old sister rented a room and use of kitchen, bought their own food and cooked their own meals.

In *Esther Mary, My Pioneer Mother* incidents are narrated with a simplicity that suggests the very intelligent child that Mrs Prince must have been. There is a kind of childhood writing, of which Daisy Ashford is perhaps the doyen, which startles one by its acutely innocent intelligence and clarity of expression. Mrs Prince's prose captures this style. On the surface the book is a simple but absorbing story. After reflection, it is recognized

as a very perceptive account of one woman's life and of the quality of material and cultural living achieved by her generation of pioneers.

Memories of an Australian Girlhood comprises five stories by Eileen Haley and ten shorter stories by Lillian Rosser, both of whom grew up and live in Brisbane, although Eileen Haley has now spent some years in Mexico and two of her stories are set there. All the stories concern the relationship between men and women and their families. The stories are neither polemical parables nor semi-satirical whingeing attempting to pass off rancour as poignancy. The collection is realistic and positive, clear-sighted and forward-looking.

Haley and Rosser are very intelligent writers with a detached, penetrating insight into their own lives and the lives of other women. The compassion and, indeed, the passion in their work are as much due to their intellectual perception of working-class and middle-class lives as to their emotional apprehension of the waste and vulnerability of the spirit of women who lead these lives. If the male part of society, found in academia, working-class Brisbane or the Mexican bourgeoisie, is largely the villain, there is also a complete awareness that the men too are products of mores that are not entirely to their own liking or of their own making. Moreover, the complicity of women in their own subjugation, in spite of desperate and often poignantly courageous attempts to break the self-made emotional fetters, is an important theme in the collected stories.

The stories make it clear that women as child-bearers are handicapped in the contest for freedom and self-expression within a social framework that allows fewer true opportunities for either than optimists claim. On the other hand, the most ardent feminist must admit that the stories of Haley and Rosser suggest that much of the shiftlessness, deceit and arrogance of the men portrayed is partly due to the lack in the male life of anything like the nurturing function of women. In 1969 Haley makes the incidental point that the small liberal Father of Five Pol Sci lecturer in that year could spend nights sitting on the

sea-grass matting and enjoying the geisha-like attentions of the students in their St Lucia flat, or could participate in priapic weekends at the English Society's camp on Stradbroke Island. Ten years later, however, this intellectual and emotional permissiveness is gone:

And how if there's a Father of Five among them, they ask him pointed questions about who's taking care of the Five while he's lolling around on the sea-grass matting, until he skulks off home with his tail between his legs.

1969 is the most analytical of Haley's stories, and in its dispassionate analysis the narrator accepts that much of the male chauvinism exhibited is only possible because the girl students acquiesce in it. As her pertinent invocations of male-oriented literature from Donne to D.H. Lawrence (which is prescribed reading for women undergraduates) reminds us, women down the centuries have mostly tacitly acquiesced in the male view of the relationship between the sexes. (The obvious query that remains unanswered is, of course, what kind of male emotional infancy has demanded this unbalanced relationship to which women foolishly consent?) As the narrator admits, when she advises her friend not to tell the young man responsible that she is pregnant, women, perhaps through fear of further humiliation — "I wouldn't know if it was mine" — have too often withheld from men the salutary realities that might help male emotional growth:

"Better not tell him," I said, and she didn't. Maybe it was the wrong decision. Maybe it would have shocked Terence out of his callousness. He was young, after all. But I told her not to tell him, and she didn't. The blind leading the blind.

Haley's *Three Daughters* is an amusing but sad account of an Irish-Catholic mother's attempt to rescue her daughters from the grey, loveless drudgery of a marriage like her own, in which an apparently born-shiftless husband is reduced to absolute cipherhood by the mother's desperate struggle to provide a better chance for the girls. As in all the pieces in the collection, a strong sense of locality and time is evoked. There is also a composite indictment of the education provided by Irish-Catholic primary schools, and recognition of the staunch basic

educational function they performed. Without rancour (again, as in all the stories here) we are told plainly how it was; and, without polemic, we are made aware that the past was not good enough. This story epitomizes the tone of the collection.

Possibly Rosser's characters are more positive in their attempts to break free of dependence on shiftless men. One of her narrators is a woman married to a part-Aborigine and some of the stories have added interest in that they are unostentatiously set in a part-aboriginal background. The women's greater strength to reject an intolerable relationship seems to derive partly from their families of children who not only constitute a demand and responsibility but also fulfil a great part of their emotional need and are essential to their daily *raison d'être*.

Neither Haley's nor Rosser's stories are about self-sufficient women, but are about women whose lives are embedded deeply in their families, a fact which gives them astonishing emotional and moral complexity and subtlety. Each story deserves careful study and cannot be fully grasped and comprehended in one reading. Rosser's *Marigold* presents an older woman, a mother whose husband was helped by her daughter to leave her in pursuit of "the holiness of true love" with another woman. The mother later rejects the daughter's plea that she come and live with her crippled ex-husband and her idiot grand-child after the second wife leaves. Mother lives in a not entirely comfortable extended family setting, and somehow the daughter's request is not as importunate nor the mother's refusal as unambivalent as one would at first imagine. The reader may want to take sides, but Rosser herself sees into the situation too deeply to pass judgement. Is it shocking, or is it a sign of hope, that in the end both mother and daughter choose a kind of freedom and self-dependence?

"This cottage in suburbia, this second love-nest: it would be just you and I and my crippled ex-husband and your idiot daughter, is that right? Our gaol and our gaolers, right?" Mother demanded.

Daughter flung the armful of marigolds high into the air; they scattered and fell around her, a golden shower, as the sun disappeared behind the clouds and raindrops and tears ran down her cheeks.

"I am not going back," she said.

"You can have it all to yourself, mother. I came here to say that he needs you and my daughter needs you now. Are you going, Mother?"

"No."

Marigold is the final story in the collection, and it has the kind of rain-sodden vitality and stubborn resilience that, for me, characterizes working-class and middle-class life in the subtropical capital. The mother's garden is fecund and undisciplined, with only the hardiest fruit and flowers happily competing in the humid climate.

Rosser's ability to write with honesty without falling into bitterness, cynicism or the harsher kinds of irony is one of the distinguishing traits that makes one hope that much more of her work will reach the public. In *The Horse Called Pig* the mother-narrator supports her children by prostitution and shop-lifting, and struggles as hard and with as much sensitivity as the most respectable bourgeois parent could, to understand their needs and feelings. Her thirteen-year-old son Troy leaves home with his swag to earn money to buy a horse called Pig, but after a few days is picked up by the police for driving a car abandoned by its owner. The mother follows him across Brisbane, from police-station to Court, sometimes assisted, sometimes hindered by the police. On their way home, Troy throws his swag into the turbid water of Breakfast Creek:

"You little stinker," I said, "you little stinker! All your clothes were in there. And your blankets." "Yair," he said, "let's all hear it for the Salvation Army." "You cheeky, miserable, ungrateful little bastard!" I yelled at him. Then I kicked him in the shin as hard as I could.

"You were so proud of that swag when you made it." He hopped and grabbed at his shin. "You bitch, you don't know what it was like. Why don't you shut up, why don't you just shut up!"

I turned away from him, and waited for the words and the voice from the past to flow over me like acid. "Why don't you shut up, why don't you ever shut up?" my husband would say. "You have your long sticky beak into everything, and you never shut your great flapping mouth."

"Goodbye Pig," Troy said. I turned back to him and stared at him, surprised. "Goodbye Pig!" he called to his swag over the filthy water of Breakfast Creek. His voice cracked to a childish treble, and he beat his hands on the hard parapet of the bridge.

"GOODBYE PIG!" and the tears rolled down his cheeks.

"Oh shit," I thought, "if I even touch him he will collapse on the footpath." I looked around, with a vague idea of getting help for him, I saw the motor cycle cop coming, he was coming towards us. I grabbed his arm. "That copper is coming," I said. "He bloody well would be," he said. We turned and walked together, casually, proudly, acting a man and a woman walking down to Brunswick Street to meet Judy and have lunch in Coles.

Among contemporary Australian short fiction, Haley's and Rosser's work is singled out by its sense of truth and reality, as against the crafted factitiousness and allegorical or surrealist satire of much other writing. One type is not necessarily better than the other, but possibly *Memories of an Australian Girlhood* contains several pieces that will survive when most more experimental short fiction is outdated.

Stylistically, the writing is clear and incisive. Neither author creates prose that could be called the dreary offspring of dull-coloured journalism, but neither exhibits her tricks and devices as components of the story itself. Haley's undertone of irony is cooler and more collected than Rosser's. Rosser, though never within a whisker of hysteria, lets her style evoke the resonance of that complexity of laughter and tears that most male writers only achieve by dipping into sentimentality or cuteness. Barry Oakley and Morris Lurie are writers I admire, and their stories are comparable to Haley's and Rosser's, but my point will probably be proved, or can at least be defended, if some of their work is compared with *Memories of an Australian Girlhood*. Perhaps there is a kind of irony, so far unique to the feminine sensibility, that enables women writers to handle farce, poignancy, tragedy and social criticism within a comprehensive perspective. Whether or not this is so, Haley and Rosser have considerable success in writing within this comprehensive perspective.