Katie Langloh Parker and the Beginnings of Ethnography in Australia

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Abstract: Living across the 19th and 20th centuries, in both remote and urban communities, Katie Langloh Parker observed at first hand how the dispossession and attempted assimilation of Indigenous peoples supported the expansion of first colonial, and then national, interests. Accordingly, the records of her life and work shed further light not only on the general characteristics of this turbulent period in Australian history but also on how certain individuals and communities, both Indigenous and settler, sought to grapple with the difficult circumstances in which they were variously embroiled. The following essay considers the question of Parker’s leadership status by tracing some of the ways in which her past and contemporary influence, particularly in relation to her role as a collector of Aboriginal ‘myths and legends’, has been received and understood since the publication of her first book Australian Legendary Tales in 1896.

Keywords: Settler colonialism, ethnography, regional history, New South Wales history, women and leadership, frontier interactions, Aboriginal ‘myths and legends’

Introduction

In August 1940, the Bulletin recorded the death of Catherine Stow, known formerly as Katie Langloh Parker, remarking that ‘Australia [had] lost a useful writer’.¹ This dubious recognition, at once acknowledging and diminishing her public legacy, is representative of the ambivalence that surrounds her reputation. In this collection on leadership, it is therefore not surprising, perhaps, that the complexities of what that term might mean for women more generally are brought so clearly to the fore when presenting the claims of Katie Langloh Parker, who wrote six books (with new editions published as recently as 1978 and translations into Russian and Japanese), had a posthumous compilation of her stories awarded Children’s Book of the Year in 1954, and whose work continues to be the subject of scholarly interest and debate in the early 21st century.
Born in 1856 in South Australia, Parker spent much of her youth and adulthood in outback New South Wales. Soon after Federation, she returned to South Australia, where she resided in suburban Adelaide until her death in March 1940 at the age of 84. In living across the 19th and 20th centuries, in both remote and urban communities, Parker observed at first hand how the dispossession and attempted assimilation of Indigenous peoples supported the expansion of, first, colonial, and then national, interests, reflecting the staged development of British settlement that was playing out more broadly across the continent. Accordingly, the records of her life and work shed further light not only on the general characteristics of this turbulent period but also on how certain individuals and communities, both Indigenous and settler, sought to grapple with the difficult circumstances in which they were variously embroiled. The following essay considers the question of Parker’s leadership status by tracing some of the ways in which her past and contemporary influence, particularly in relation to her role as a collector of Aboriginal myths and legends, has been received and understood since the publication of her first book, *Australian Legendary Tales*, in 1896.

**Living on the Frontier**

Katie Langloh Parker was christened Catherine Eliza Somerville Field. She was born on 1 May 1856 to the pastoralist, Henry Field, and his wife, Sophia (née Newland), at Encounter Bay, 100 kilometres to the south of Adelaide. Known as Ramong by the Ramindjeri people, the bay had been given its English name in 1802 by Matthew Flinders to commemorate his chance meeting with the French explorer, Nicholas Baudin, as they criss-crossed their chartings of the southern coast. Parker’s parents had been among the first settlers to arrive in the new colony. Sophia’s father, Congregationalist minister the Reverend Ridgway William Newland, who had been appointed by the Colonial Missionary Society to lead a party of 30 colonists, arrived at Encounter Bay with his second wife, Martha Keeling, and eight children in 1839. Newland became known as a resourceful ‘pioneer’ of the lands he acquired, further consolidating British claims by preaching throughout the regions near his settlement, opening a chapel at Encounter Bay in 1846 and acting as the local justice of the peace. The family claimed to have fostered close relationships between their children and the Ramindjeri, and memories of this period, including vocabularies, stories and novels, are recalled in works by Parker and by her uncle, Simpson Newland.

Henry Field had arrived from England in 1837, two years before the Reverend Newland. He married Sophia in 1849 on her father’s property at Encounter
Bay, where several of their children were subsequently born. The couple soon acquired their own farming land in the area but, in 1860, the growing family packed up their household and travelled by inland paddle steamer to ‘Marra’ station, on the upper reaches of the Darling River near Wilcannia in northwestern New South Wales. Their new life signified further disruption to the lives of the Paakanji peoples, whose lands had already been ‘opened up’ for settlement by explorers Thomas Mitchell and Charles Sturt. The relocation brought the family both prosperity and sorrows; in January 1862, two of their daughters, Jane and Henrietta, drowned in the nearby river, while the life of six-year-old Katie was saved by their Aboriginal nursemaid, Miola, whose actions would later loom large in Parker’s recollections. In 1872, the Field family returned to Kensington, a suburb of Adelaide, leaving the property in the charge of Sophia’s brother, Simpson Newland. Sophia died later that year after the birth of her eighth child. Henry moved his family to nearby Glenelg where sixteen-year old Katie and her younger sister, Rosina, were enrolled at a local girls’ school.

At the age of eighteen, in January 1875, Katie married pastoralist Langloh Parker, a man sixteen years her senior, and within a few years found herself once again living along the northern rivers. Like his young wife, Langloh Parker had been born in the colonies, in Hamilton, Van Diemen’s Land, in 1839. Having travelled to Victoria in 1854, he later became involved in various agricultural and business interests in New South Wales. In 1877, Langloh acquired ‘Bangate’ station on the Narran River, on the lands of the Yuwalaraay people. He and Katie journeyed there in 1879 and stayed for the next twenty years.

Born and marrying into prominent settler families that were at the coalface of colonial expansion, Parker thus spent much of her youth and adulthood in frontier environments, both at Encounter Bay and in the inland regions of New South Wales, along the Darling and Narran Rivers, where, as elsewhere, the process of converting Aboriginal lands to pastoral leaseholds had been relentless. In some areas, however, from the 1860s to the late 1890s, it became possible for numbers of Aboriginal people who had survived the initial onslaught of violence, disease and dislocation, to seek to accommodate their new circumstances by residing in camps on vast stations like Bangate, effectively exchanging their labour for the capacity to maintain social and cultural links with their traditional lands. Given the mass departures of itinerant white farm workers seeking their fortunes on the goldfields, and the relative absence of white women, certain pastoralists saw pragmatic value in exploiting nearby Aboriginal people as reliable labourers who possessed expert knowledge and skills and had an obvious interest in staying on their
country. Historian Heather Goodall has analysed the scope and significance of this phenomenon in New South Wales and explains, too, how living in this proximity supported a far more varied complex of relationships between Aboriginal peoples and settlers than commonly occurred either before or after this period. While influenced by her childhood experiences at Encounter Bay and at Marra station on the Darling, it was this period of Katie Langloh Parker’s life—together with the responses of the local people to the encroachment of settlements like Bangate—that inspired her to record what she knew of Aboriginal ‘myths and legends’. And it is this confluence of time, place and record-keeper that has attracted broader interest in her work for well over a century.

Bangate, the Parkers’ 215,000 acre holding, represented a relatively large undertaking, which regularly ran more than 100,000 sheep and cattle. Langloh also acted as magistrate and justice of the peace in nearby Walgett and was an identity in the fledgling horse-racing industry. For some time, the audacious ambitions he shared with his fellow pastoralists seemed to flourish, although many remained deeply indebted to pastoral companies. Katie, meanwhile, sought interests outside the usual domestic models available to her. Unlike her mother and grandmother, whose maternity had brought them multiple joys and tragedies, including, ultimately, their own early deaths, Katie was unable to have children. In addition to supervising a large household, which also hosted frequent visitors, she turned her attention to recording the stories told to her by the Yuwalaraay people who were also living on Bangate. She took particular interest in the perspectives of the women and girls, some of whom worked in the homestead as domestic servants and others of whom she regularly visited at their riverside camps. Parker published two separate volumes of these stories in 1896 and 1898, and a more formal ethnographic account of Yuwalaraay people and culture in 1905. A further collection of stories was published in 1930, while her broader reminiscences appeared only posthumously, under the editorship of her biographer, Marcie Muir, in 1982.

With the failure of the station following years of bad seasons and drought, the Parkers finally left Bangate and moved to Sydney in 1901, where the ailing Langloh was diagnosed with stomach cancer. The widespread Depression of the 1890s saw many such foreclosures, and possibilities for co-existence on pastoral properties generally gave way to state-enforced removals of Aboriginal people on to missions and reserves where remoteness from their own countries, and the custodianship responsibilities they entailed, made it increasingly difficult for Indigenous peoples to maintain distinctive communities and cultures. The period was dominated by settler interests—
which, at times, of course, manifested as outright violence and abuse—but, as Heather Goodall notes:

Nevertheless, living on these pastoral camps is remembered widely by Aboriginal people as being most often an experience of peaceful community life, in which they could travel frequently over their country, maintain traditional ceremonial and social traditions, eat healthy native foods as well as European rations, speak their own languages and teach their children about land, traditions, and recent history. These are remembered as times when Aboriginal traditional knowledge was acknowledged by whites for its value to pastoral work, and when Aboriginal expertise at stockwork, horse riding and property management were widely respected.

Within this context, for all its obvious partiality and presumptions, Parker’s representation of the beliefs, practices and observations of the Aboriginal people who lived on Bangate station opens a window on to two different ways of knowing and being in the world that unfolded, for a while at least, in close proximity.

Everyone’s lives at Bangate would change as the new century began. Following Langloh’s death in 1903, Katie travelled to England where she met and married her second husband, lawyer Percival Randolph Stow, in 1905. The couple eventually settled in Glenelg in South Australia, where Parker spent the remaining years of her life in the very different circumstances of post-Federation Australia, in a growing city far removed from the life she had recently led on the Narran River, and previously on the Darling and by Encounter Bay during her childhood. She was now nearly 50 years old and, while embracing the more conventional social and fundraising activities of a woman of her age and position, she continued to reflect on the years when her family lived in such close contact with Aboriginal people and to publish the work that she had begun during her twenty years at Bangate. Written under the name of K. Langloh Parker, this is the work for which she is best known and which was widely distributed well into the twentieth century.

Observing, and Telling and Recording Stories

Parker’s early reputation as an amateur ethnographer was precipitated by her decision to publish the stories and observations she had recorded at Bangate. The first collection, *Australian Legendary Tales: Folklore of the Noongahburrahs as Told to the Picaninnies*, appeared simultaneously with
David Nutt in London, in a series called ‘Fairy Tales of the British Empire’, and by Melville, Muller & Slade in Melbourne. The book included an introduction by Andrew Lang, the Scottish classics scholar and collector of folk and fairy tales, who was also an acknowledged expert in the growing field of anthropology. A second edition soon followed. New stories were published in 1898 under the title, *More Australian Legendary Tales*. To complement her writings on Aboriginal folklore, and perhaps at the suggestion of Andrew Lang, Parker published a more consciously ethnographic work, *The Euahlayi Tribe: A Study of Aboriginal Life in Australia*, with Archibald Constable & Co., London, in 1905. While she had also prepared a further collection of Aboriginal stories entitled *Woggheeguy: Australian Aboriginal Legends*, directed more specifically at children, Adelaide publisher F.W. Preece did not produce the book until 1930, by which time Parker was 74 years old and writing as Catherine Stow.

In addition to occasional articles in publications such as *Lone Hand* and the *Bulletin* and a small booklet called *Sketches of Children from Life*, Parker’s other main works included a 1918 children’s book, *The Walkabouts of Wurrun-nah*, and *My Bush Book*, which reflected on her life at Bangate but was published only posthumously by her biographer, Marcie Muir, in 1982. In 1936, two stories from *More Australian Legendary Tales* were republished in *A Book of South Australia—Women in the First Hundred Years*. Some of Parker’s smaller publications reflected the concerns of her new life in Adelaide; she produced the widely used South Australian *Kookaburra Cookery Book* in 1911, while *A Gardening Calendar* and *A Breakfast Calendar* raised funds for the Adelaide Red Cross during the First World War.

**Ambivalence**

While Parker’s representations of Yuwalarraay people’s cultural beliefs and practices, and particularly their ‘myths and legends’, have continued to attract critical attention for well over a century, her reputation as a leader in the field of early ethnographic practice in Australia has been far from clear-cut. While Parker herself did not claim to be more than an amateur, a brief survey of responses to her publications since they first appeared at the end of the 19th century gives some indication of the ambivalence that surrounds the meaning and significance of her work.

From the outset, the reception was mixed. Andrew Lang’s introductory comments on Parker’s texts welcomed her presentation of Aboriginal stories...
that were previously unknown to European readers. While claiming that *Australian Legendary Tales* thereby made an important contribution to knowledge of ‘aetiological myths, explanatory of the markings and habits of animals and so forth’, Lang nevertheless described the stories as lacking the ‘ingenious dramatic turns of our own Märchen’. He later emphasised, however, the significance of Parker’s long relationships with the Aboriginal women and children who lived on Bangate, writing that she ‘has had … all the advantages of the squire’s wife in a rural neighbourhood’ and that, as a woman, she had ‘unexampled opportunities of study’ that were ‘hardly possible for a scientific male observer’. In her account of Parker’s work, Marcie Muir cites several favourable scholarly reviews of the time. An article in the *Australian Anthropological Journal* in April 1897 praised Parker’s ‘excellent’ methodology in ‘obtaining from the elders of the tribes what they could furnish, when their confidence was secured by one who knew their language, and could thus understand what they said’. It continued:

It is all the better … that the materials as printed have not been altered by additions of her own imagination, but have been translated as strictly as possible in a true and unaltered manner from the versions given in the Aboriginal speeches by the elders of the tribe.

A *Science of Man* reviewer recommended *More Australian Legendary Tales* to the ‘non-scientific’ reader but observed that ‘to anthropologists, who have studied similar compositions of other peoples they represent far more interesting characteristics than mere amusement, or fairy tales’.

While an 1896 review in the *Bulletin* dismissed *Australian Legendary Tales* as ‘a literary curiosity’ with ‘ethnologically little significance’, Muir argues that Parker’s name was ‘well known in anthropological circles’ by 1906 when *The Euahlayi Tribe* was attracting further positive reviews in the English journals, *Nature* and the *Athenaeum*. Muir argues too, however, that the long wait for her next publication, in the form of the children’s collection *Woggheeguy* in 1930, condemned Parker to virtual obscurity in scientific terms, especially as much of her earlier work was no longer in print. In welcoming the belated appearance of *Woggheeguy*, the acclaimed Australian novelist, Katherine Susannah Prichard, regretted that Parker’s work ‘has never been sufficiently recognized; and nowadays when so many people are alive to the sociological importance of the Aborigines, our homage should be eager and implicit.’ While further editions of Parker’s work were produced during the 20th century, including Henrietta Drake-Brockman’s compilation of previously published stories that was awarded Children’s Book of the Year in 1954, they were aimed mostly at children and at the school reader market.
These developments perhaps explain both Parker’s absence from Julie Marcus’s 1993 collection, *First in their Field: Women and Australian Anthropology*, and Hilary Carey’s 1998 claim that ‘Parker’s importance as a source for popular notions of Aboriginality is difficult to overemphasize’. This critical assessment of Parker’s work, and particularly of her characterisation of the deity Baiame, places it at the forefront of what Carey sees as a much-neglected but enormously influential genre of writing that not only informed repressive anthropological constructions of Aboriginal culture as ‘timeless’, but also comprehensively shaped how ‘traditional’ Aboriginal culture could be perceived by the broader community, effectively upholding the assimilationist intentions of the nation-state for much of the first half of the 20th century. It is significant, too, that Carey identifies a shift between Parker’s initial grounded commitment both to naming the individual informants she had come to know at Bangate and to establishing the local pertinence of their stories, and her later more detached representations of the ‘Land of Byamee’ that imposed on it all the constraints of the narrative of ‘the dying race’. Carey sees Parker’s later form of writing as responsible for distributing the kind of ‘soft primitivism’ that informed more recent populist publications produced for the tourist and New Age spirituality markets.

Meanwhile, since the mid-1980s, feminist scholars have equivocated over their responses to colonial white women such as Katie Langloh Parker, who were unusual among their peers in their openness to Aboriginal ways of knowing, and forthright in their criticism of settler violence. Academic debate considered whether these women could be seen as ‘sympathetic’ with colonised women or whether such readings chose to ignore their inevitable complicity in the violence of colonialism. More recently, the ethnocentrism of the terms of these debates was itself subjected to criticism, prompting more complex analyses of colonial relationships and of the very categories on which they continue to depend. In Australia and New Zealand, Indigenous scholars Aileen Moreton-Robinson and Linda Tuhiiwai Smith have been prominent critics of the implicit ‘whiteness’ of academic scholarship and of the need to continuously uncover the politics of representation.

Parker’s work has of course been subject to these critiques. Tanya Dalziell, for example, views Parker’s publications as irredeemably bound up in the discourses and practices of colonial ethnography and condemns what she terms the analytical trope of ‘the sympathetic white woman’ as similarly repressive in fostering a simple binary of complicity or resistance. As I have discussed elsewhere, with Patricia Grimshaw and Ann Standish, there are clearly multiple complexities in utilising a white woman’s writings as sources
for understanding Aboriginal cultural practices and beliefs; in the case of Parker’s publications, Yuwalaraay women’s experiences were represented to readers through the lens of a settler woman’s interests and perceptions. Nevertheless, following Goodall, we have argued that given the paucity of other literary sources for the period, Parker’s writings warrant serious attention for the insight they offer into Yuwalaraay women’s continued care of their land and maintenance of the cultural practices so closely related to it, a matter of particular import in the light of post-Mabo land rights legislation of the 1990s under which Aborigines, in order to claim title or usage, are forced to prove continuing historical attachments to former tribal lands.  

Goodall’s 1996 analysis of the brief period of co-existence on pastoral properties in late 19th-century New South Wales highlights the embeddedness of Parker’s stories ‘in the landforms of Yuwalaraay people’s country’:

> Story after story tells of ancestral journeys from named place to named place along the Narran and Barwon rivers, explaining why and how each watercourse and its surrounding landforms were created, and the powers each place continues to embody. These stories also explain the connections between kin groups of people, other species and the land, linking them all inextricably … They give us a faint glimpse of the enlivened land, the “speaking land” that south-eastern Aboriginal people saw when they looked around their country before invasion began. Such a glimpse allows us to see how the experiences of the invasion would be drawn into this web of meaning around place.  

Parker’s reputation has waxed and waned throughout the 20th century and beyond, according to the periods and fields within which her various publications have been considered. For Goodall, however, Parker’s work represents some of the best ethnographic writing of the era; in drawing on her ‘long and sensitive observation’ during the many years of living in Yuwalaraay country, Parker’s ‘careful recording of mythologies and customs demonstrated in detail the links between Yuwalaraay people and their land’.  

Goodall’s response to Parker’s publications, first published a century before her own, directs attention to their political relevance in the present for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people seeking to redress the violence of colonialism that continues to reverberate throughout the institutions and practices of contemporary Australia.
A Leader in Ethnographic Practice in Australia

In the early 21st century, managerialism tends to dominate many public understandings, or expressions, of what is meant by leadership, with various business-school models of success vying for recognition. Yet, even within such rigid contemporary frameworks, one key commentator claims that ‘leadership is influence—nothing more, nothing less’.43

Any assessment of the leadership status of a woman like Katie Langloh Parker must conclude that her influence is undeniable. Yet Parker did not proclaim herself a leader.44 While committed to learning the language of the Yuwalaraa people who lived alongside her at Bangate in Yuwalaraa country, to checking and re-checking their stories, and to recording and disseminating their particular ways of knowing, she retained her general scepticism about the claims of the anthropology profession to detachment:

[If] you want to keep your anthropological ideas quite firm, it is safer to let the blacks remain in inland Australia while you stay a few thousand miles away. Otherwise, your preconceived notions are almost sure to totter to their foundations; and nothing is more annoying than to have elaborately built-up, delightfully logical theories, played ninepins with by an old greybeard of a black, who apparently objects to his beliefs being classified, docketed, and pigeon-holed, until he has had his say.45

Despite Andrew Lang’s attempt to accord Parker’s studies some scholarly standing, others said that the legends were too imaginative, beautiful and poetic to be genuine: that Parker herself must be their true author. Parker was incensed. ‘A dark skin is certainly a mask to most people, and so those who have it are little known’, she retorted, though she admitted she had once been in that position herself. When she relayed her critics’ assumptions to her informants, they responded with scorn, and spat contemptuously: ‘and certainly it is hard that having taken their country, not so bloodlessly either as people would have us believe, we should arrogate to ourselves their own poetical thoughts’.46

As both a common and uncommon woman of her class, her times and her place, Parker falls between the domains of the public and private, the professional and the amateur, the coloniser and the critic of colonisation. She was a woman complicit in colonialism and her writings were clearly compromised in the ways discussed above; they have also become an
enduring record of the ways Aboriginal people maintained ‘the enlivened land’ through grasping the opportunities that were available to them during times of enormous hardship as the 19th century drew to a close. Despite the complex legacies her work has imparted, in terms of modelling an ethnographic practice based on long-term relationships in a particular locality, Parker led the field in Australia for several years.


2 For further reading on settler colonialism as a distinct colonial formation that proceeds in stages according to a ‘logic of elimination’, see Patrick Wolfe, ‘Nation and MiscegeNation: Discursive Continuity in the Post-Mabo Era’, *Social Analysis*, no. 36 (1994): 93–152.

3 Katie Langloh Parker, *Australian Legendary Tales: Folklore of the Noongahburrahs as Told to the Piccaninnies* (London: David Nutt, 1896).


5 Sophie Field’s brother, Simpson Newland, lived with the Field family at Marra. He managed the station following the family’s return to Adelaide and later became a noted politician in South Australia, supporting the development of the Northern Territory, regulation of the Murray River, protection of the Coorong and its reservation as Aboriginal land. However, he is best known as a novelist. His classic tale of early colonial life in South Australia *Paving the Way* was published in 1893 (and republished seven times by 1962), while the less successful *Blood Tracks of the Bush*, published in 1900, was forthright about the violence of police and pastoralists. His *ADB* entry states that: ‘Newland valued the education he had acquired as a child from the Ramindjeri people of Encounter Bay and he dealt with the River Darling Aborigines, the Parkingees [sic], whose vocabulary he collected, kindly and sensitively’. G.K. Jenkin, ‘Newland, Simpson (1835–1925)’, *ADB*, Volume 11, 1988, 10–12.


8 For further information on Langloh Parker, see Ian Itter, *Langloh Parker, Yanga and Bangate Stations* (Swan Hill: Ian Itter, 2011).

9 Katie Langloh Parker’s recollections of the journey are included in *My Bush Book*.


12 For further details on this period of Parker’s life, see Muir, *My Bush Book*, and also Itter.

13 Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, 66.

14 Goodall notes in ‘New South Wales’ (McGrath (ed.), *Contested Ground*, 64), that violence and colonial repression later forced ‘wide social distances between Aborigines and whites and there has been little public acknowledgment of such close relationships and the knowledge which must have flowed between such groups of people’.


17 As Parker wrote Yuvalaray.

18 Although Parker’s *My Bush Book: Based on the Notebooks of an Old-Time Squatter’s Wife, 1879–1901* was primarily a collection of reminiscences of her years at Bangate, it originally including the typescript for *The Euahlayi Tribe*. Muir’s 1982 publication includes Parker’s manuscript, as well as Muir’s biographical notes on Parker, together with some critical analysis of her work.


21 Parker, *Australian Legendary Tales*, xv.

22 Cited in Carey, 208.


26 Cited in ibid., 171–2. This criticism prompted Parker to write a detailed account of the rigor with which she recorded, checked and re-checked the stories. The original is in the Mitchell Library, New South Wales.


Although her absence is noted in the preface of Julie Marcus (ed.), First in Their Field (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1993), xiv.


See also Evans, Grimshaw and Standish.


also Pierson and Chaudhuri (eds), and Patricia Grimshaw, Katie Holmes and Marilyn Lake (eds), *Women’s Rights and Human Rights: International Historical Perspectives* (London and New York: Palgrave, 2001).


39 Tanya Dalziell, “‘We should try, while there is yet time, to gather all the information possible of a race fast dying out’: Unsettling Sympathetic Women”, *Australian Feminist Studies* 17, no. 39 (2001): 325–42.

40 Evans, Grimshaw, and Standish; Grimshaw and Evans. See also Standish.

41 Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, 17

42 Ibid., 157.


45 Parker, *The Euahlayi Tribe*, 141.