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*Rosa Praed's readership:
in search of an Australian audience*

This paper is inspired by something Elizabeth Webby has taught me about the work of literary studies: that is not only about what is in books, but also what happens to them after they are written. That is, that we can write histories of readers as well as of writers. This paper traces the history of Rosa Praed's Australian readership, considering who read her novels in this country and under what circumstances. In focusing on Praed's second novel, *Policy and Passion: a novel of Australian life* (1881), I have encountered another readership worth tracing: the Australian readership as a trope, an idea circulating around Praed's novels as well as within them.

Policy and Passion: a novel of Australian life is preceded by an "Introductory Note", the tone of which one reviewer described as "positively alarming."¹ In it Praed sets out her role as describing Australian "society" to an English audience. The note ends:

The scenery described here is drawn directly from nature; and the name of Leichardt's Land [sic] – a tribute to the memory of a daring but ill-fated explorer – is but a transparent mask covering features that will be familiar to many of my Australian readers.

But it is to the British public that I, an Australian, address myself, with the hope that I may in some slight degree aid in bridging over the gulf which divides the Old world from the Young.²

There has been a widespread assumption that Praed's audience was primarily, if not exclusively, British.³ This introduction breezily implies the existence of Australian readers for Praed's novel despite

the explicit address of her novel to the British public. Did Praed have Australian readers, and if not, why would she invent them?

Policy and Passion was first published in London by Richard Bentley and Son on March 24, 1881, in a three-volume edition sold at 31s. 6d. This first edition sold at least 570 copies.⁴ Only two of these are listed as "foreign and colonial" sales, but it is clear from Praed's correspondence with her step-mother, Nora Murray-Prior, that this first edition of the novel did reach Australia, although it was not widely available here.⁵ The novel is likely to have been popular in the British circulating libraries, as a second edition, in one volume, was published by Bentley on 24 November that year, as part of the "Bentleys' Favourite Novels" series, at 6 shillings. By 1889 the one-volume edition had sold more than 1,200 copies, 489 of which were listed under "Foreign and Colonial" sales.⁶ This respectable figure may have persuaded George Bentley to re-publish the novel as part of his "Australian (or 'Kangaroo') series" in June 1887. The "Australian Edition" of the novel was published as *Longleat of Kooralbyn or Policy and Passion: A Novel of Australian Life*.⁷ All editions in this series (which included Clarke's *For the Term of His Natural Life*, Leakey's *The Broad Arrow* and Martin's *An Australian Girl*) were sold at 2s. 6d. and marked "Issued for circulation in the Australian colonies only."⁸ *Longleat of Kooralbyn* sold approximately 920 copies, of which 865 were listed as "Foreign and Colonial" sales. These sales figures are by no means definitive but they indicate that a good proportion (49% of the sales for which we have records) of the copies sold of the various editions of the novel made their way to the "Foreign and Colonial" market. These records also indicate the extent to which Australian readerships were factored into Bentley's business decisions. The opening page of *Longleat of Kooralbyn* bears a note:

The favourable reception which was accorded to this story of Antipodean life when it first appeared in three-volume form in London, under the title of 'Policy and Passion,' warrants the experiment which is now made of a special edition, in a more popular form, for Australian readers.⁹

The existence of this edition suggests that Bentley expected there would be an Australian readership for the novel, based on its sales and

positive reviews in London. By the time *Policy and Passion* was reissued in 1887, Praed had published eight novels, most of which were sufficiently successful to be reprinted, and one of which (*Miss Jacobsen's Chance*) was serialised in the *Melbourne Leader* (1886). In this intervening period, several of Praed's novels faced controversy in the British press. *Nadine: The Study of a Woman*, published by Chapman and Hall in 1882, was subject to numerous outraged reviews and accordingly brought Praed some measure of both celebrity and readership in Britain.¹⁰ *Nadine* was one of three "fashionable novels", used by George Moore as the basis for his critique of the role of circulating libraries in censorship in *Literature at Nurse or Circulating Morals* (1885).¹¹ His inclusion of Praed amongst the "kings and queens of the circulating libraries"¹² indicates the extent of her readership in Britain at the time, and also was likely, as Lawson points out, to have drawn further attention to Praed's novels. *The Bond of Wedlock* (1887) was first published earlier in the same year as the Australian edition of *Longleat*; this novel, and its dramatisation as *Ariane* in 1888 caused further scandal due to its representation of marriage, adultery and domestic violence.¹³

We can make a good case for Praed's celebrity, and for a reasonable readership of her novels, in England. It is also clear that Praed's English celebrity status, and her scandals, transferred to Australia. Louisa Lawson's *Dawn* published a piece of verse satirising "Ariane" and its parody ("'Airey' Annie, A Travestie of Mrs C. Praed's play of 'Ariane'") asking "Why link bad women and bad men with all the wedding rings?" in 1888.¹⁴ In 1890, 1891 and 1895 Praed received some biographical attention in *The Australasian* and the *Queenslander*. The portraits in *The Australasian* were reprinted, at least in part, from the British periodicals *Queen* and *Gentlewoman*. Despite the attention placed in these portraits on Praed's background as a Queenslander, she is nonetheless presented as an English celebrity.¹⁵ Praed's correspondence with her step-mother, Nora Murray-Prior, along with the Australian reviews of Praed's novels, suggest a high degree of sensitivity towards how Praed would be received in England. English reviews of Praed's novels as well as her mentions in the social pages of English periodicals would have been read in Australia. The *Athenaeum* and the *Spectator*, for example, were widely held in Australian

libraries.¹⁶ Nora Murray-Prior's letters also indicate an interest in, and access to, mentions of Praed in the British press. She writes, "The Pall Mall and the Daily News are delightfully intelligent papers. I have not seen the Athenaeum yet."¹⁷ Her mother, Emily Barton, writes to her daughter with regard to *Policy and Passion*: "I fancy it would better stand an English than a colonial review, and I am looking out for it in the 'Saturday'."¹⁸ Barton was looking in vain; although the London *Saturday Review* ran advertisements for *Policy and Passion* between March 19 and May 21, 1881, it did not review the novel.

We should not assume that the paucity of Australian publications of Praed's work (in book or serial form) indicates a lack of readership for it. On 17 April 1881, approximately two weeks after the release of *Policy and Passion*, Praed wrote to George Bentley for advice regarding an offer she had received from the *Australasian*. She writes: "The Austn has made me an offer for the right of bringing out my next novel in weekly instalments in Australia"¹⁹ Bentley responded from his sick-bed, advising Praed "to make the Australian pub.n. wholly hang upon the English one, or your copyright will be in danger ... only think of your book and make it the best you can." Praed is likely to have taken Bentley's advice, because as far as I have been able to ascertain, none of her novels were serialised in the *Australasian*. There was interest in serialising her novels in the Australian press, but the necessity to maintain copyright in Britain prevented Praed from being able to take up all opportunities offered to her. This interest from newspapers suggests that there was a presumption of a local readership interested in her work.

Policy and Passion received some attention in the Australian press. It was reviewed in the *Queenslander* in June 1881, in the *Australasian* in August 1881 and again in that paper when it was reissued as *Longleat of Kooralbyn* in 1887. The initial review in the *Australasian* presents Praed as a promising *debutante* writer who is yet to learn "where to stop,"²⁰ as the reviewer expressed some concern about the morality of the novel. Six years later, when reviewed as part of Bentley's "Australian Series", it is clear that Praed is sufficiently well known in Australia by this stage that generalisations can be made about her work, which has attained some notoriety: "Mrs Praed's stories are too

frequently of the 'flesh and the devil' type, and thus hardly fit to be introduced into the domestic circle."²¹ Such notoriety denotes celebrity but not necessarily readership. Some years later, in 1894, an *Argus* reviewer suggests such notoriety had created a readership for Praed's work by describing characters in *Outlaw and Lawmaker* as "kissing and hugging one another in that incontinent fashion familiar to Mrs Praed's readers."²² This is an assertion that Praed had readers, and readers who have read more than one of her works in order to be familiar with (and, presumably, inappropriately appreciative of) the "incontinent" physical affection of her characters.

The available library loans data for Praed's novels supports this assertion, to some extent. Unfortunately there are few records available for the 1880s, as there is a marked preference for contemporary work in the records. However, at the Rosedale Mechanics Institute in Victoria, for which there is data from 1905 to 1908 and 1911-1914, *Policy and Passion* was borrowed three times: twice in 1906 and once in 1914.²³ This is not a significant number of borrowings, but the fact that the novel is still circulating 25 and 33 years after it was first published indicates the likelihood of more substantial borrowings around the time of its publication. This data also enables us to look at what the people who borrowed Praed's work also borrowed, and what books they borrowed in common with other readers of Praed's work. Two patterns that become clear as we look at the records for Praed's later novels are the likelihood of readers borrowing several of Praed's novels, and of Praed's readers also borrowing other Australian works. For the Port Germein Institute in South Australia, Praed's *Nulma* (published 1897) was loaned fifty times, and *Outlaw and Lawmaker* (1893) was borrowed thirty-nine times. The most popular work at this library, Rider Haggard's *Beatrice*, was loaned seventy-nine times in the period, so Praed's borrowings, while not large, were significant. Of the thirty-six people who borrowed *Outlaw and Lawmaker* during this period, eighteen also borrowed at least one other Praed novel. Eight of these borrowed three or more of Praed's novels. Mrs L. Trew, for example, borrowed *Outlaw and Lawmaker* (1899), *Nulma* (1900), *The Scourge Stick* (1900), and *Zero* (1901) between 1899 and 1901. She also borrowed novels by Catherine Martin, Ada

Cambridge, Henry Lawson and Rolf Boldrewood alongside those by Dickens, Eliot, Bulwer Lytton, Charles Reade, Hawthorne, Mrs Henry Wood, Hardy, Haggard, Bellamy and the very popular Silas Hocking.

The Port Germein data suggests that readers of Praed novels were not isolated: there was a community of people reading them, at about the same time in around the same location, and these people shared the readership of other texts, including a significant number of Australian novels. This data also confirms, to some extent, the assertion of the grumpy review in the *Argus* cited earlier: Praed had a readership who liked her novels and would have come to *Longleat* of *Kooralbyn*, for example, with a familiarity with her work.

Praed's correspondence with her step-mother, Nora Murray-Prior, is a valuable record of the responses of one particular local community of readers to Praed's work. Murray-Prior wrote to Praed from Queensland, telling of the excitement amongst friends and family as to the arrival of "the book!!!" The novel was read by several members of the Murray-Prior family and was also passed on to friends of the family. Murray-Prior reports back to Praed with all that she hears about the novel, in some cases reproducing relevant sections of letters from family members for Praed. In this manner we hear that Murray-Prior's mother, Emily Barton, read the novel "with pleasure not unmixed with sorrow, that such a dark side of Australian habits and society should be presented to English readers."²⁴ From Murray-Prior we also learn that she does not think

the book takes so much as it ought in Queensland. Maggie (who had not read it) told me that people said it was too much like 'Ouida' and that she oughtn't to read it. Neither of your aunts liked it - Aunt R. thinks it a slur upon colonial society - cannot see that it is clever and says - 'If Rosie could only write like Mrs Henry Wood'!!! Aunt L. is shocked and thinks it too personal.²⁵

Praed's novel had quickly won her a reputation (of the questionable kind), in the eyes of the "people" who told Maggie the writing was akin to that of controversial romance writer Ouida. The opinions of the various aunts also indicate the extent to which Australian

readers read *Policy and Passion* as representing Australian society to British readers. Although we cannot take the opinions of the author's family members as representative of a wider readership (they are, as Barton writes, "behind the scenes as to the characters"²⁶), Nora saw herself as reporting back to Praed from Queensland and was attempting to give Praed the broadest and most balanced picture she could as to the novel's reception there.

Another indication as to the popularity of *Policy and Passion* is that it was sufficiently well-known for theatre entrepreneur Wybert Reeve to think that a stage adaptation would be a paying proposition. In April 1884, Reeve staged his adaptation of Praed's novel as "Passion" at Sydney's Gaiety Theatre. It ran for two weeks, received positive reviews and, according to said reviews, appreciative audiences. Reeve appears to have done what Praed's publisher wanted her to do in the first place: "tone it down." Honoria, our heroine, is re-named "Myra"; Connie Vallancy, the "adventuress" with whom Thomas Longleat steers dangerously close to a liason, conceals the fact that she is married from him (rendering his behaviour somewhat less shocking), and most importantly, Longleat is no longer a transported convict and thus does not need to die in the end. Reeve adapted the story according to both the demands of the stage and expectations as to what would appeal to an Australian audience.

In tracing the history of Praed's readership I have found evidence of some people in Australia who borrowed, bought, read and wrote about *Policy and Passion*. I have also found traces of the circulation of the idea of Praed's Australian readers, in George Bentley's decisions as to how to reprint the novel, in the interest shown in Praed by Australian newspapers, in the comments made in reviews and correspondence, and in Reeve's adaptation.

The idea of an Australian readership came, increasingly, to shape the cultural productions created and consumed in Australia. It affected which novels publishers took on and what advice they gave authors, how plays were written and which plays chosen to show in our theatres, how films were made and which were screened. It has affected the form Australian culture has taken, and also the ways in which that culture has positioned people as members of an Australian constituency,

whether as market or polity. Almost twenty years before Federation, Praed's "Australian readers" were a nascent form of national community, and one that was intimately tied to the circumstances of trans-national cultural marketplace of the late nineteenth century.

Praed's comment as to her "Australian readers" in her introductory note to *Policy and Passion* may not have been intended for her Australian readers at all, but rather, as she tells us in the following sentence, for the British public. She was not conjuring knowledge of her actual readership in her home country, but rather the *idea* of her "Australian readers." If we read this Introductory Note as Amanda Lawson does, as "a strategy to authorise and authenticate Praed's specialist knowledge of Australia and of the Australian character types she would establish in her fiction"²⁷, the idea of Praed's Australian readers acts to authenticate the Australian setting of her novel, for her English readers as much as her Australian ones. This comment marks her involvement in the invention of the idea of an Australian readership.

Australians' sense of themselves as a distinct readership was pieced together in part through representations for and from Britain. The *Queenslander's* review of *Policy and Pasison*, for example, begins:

Although in the introductory note to the volumes before us Mrs Praed addresses more particularly the British public, we fancy that, however great the success of so powerful a book in England, it will be even more eagerly perused by Australian readers.²⁸

This reviewer inhabits, or says he inhabits, precisely the privileged position Praed implies for her Australian readers in her Introductory Note: as sleuths, able to see through the guise of fiction to recognise the truthfulness of her portrayals of Australian life. For Australian readers, he writes, "the name of 'Leichhardt's Land' will be but a thin film of disguise, readily penetrated, through which familiar scenes, truthfully and graphically described, will be repeatedly recognised."²⁹ The suggestion, provided by Praed and taken up by this review, is that there is a distinct mode of reading available to the Australian reader of this novel. This position is only available because of the existence

to the other, less perceptive readers: the British ones. This suggestion is also apparent in the novel itself, as Australian readers are not only appealed to in the Introductory Note but also figured within the narrative itself. Praed was involved in inventing an Australian readership for readers on both sides of the world, and not only in the framing of the novel but also within it.

When we first meet our heroine, Honoria Longleat, she is dangling rather voluptuously in a hammock, reading a novel. She tells her suitor, Dyson Maddox, how dissatisfied such reading makes her.

'The novels only make the dullness more unendurable, for they describe life to me as I have no chance of knowing it.'

'You mean the life beyond Australia?'

'Yes. This is only a state of half-existence. Books are so unsatisfying. I read them greedily at first; then throw them aside in disgust. They never take one below the surface. There must be some deep experience, even here. Human beings are the same the world over; only their surroundings influence them. What we know well seems commonplace' [52].

The Australian reader in *Policy and Passion* is a troubled figure, trying to work out the relationship between her life and desires and those of the people in the novels she is reading. Lawson reads *Policy and Passion* as setting out "an attenuated discussion about the mismatch between reading novels and the realities of experience ... [the] gap between colonial subjectivity and the dominance of nineteenth-century fiction based on the British literary canon."³⁰ In part, as Lawson suggests, Praed is probing the implications of always reading another nation's books, and the already-globalised nature of nineteenth-century book culture in the period in which Australian nationhood was still being "brokered", as Dolin has put it.³¹ I would go a little further than Lawson and suggest that Praed's novel points to the role of reading novels—particularly novels from elsewhere—in defining a reader's colonial subjectivity. In writing about Honoria's reading, and indeed the reading of other characters in the novel, Praed flags the Australian reader as a separate creature from other

readers, with particular interests, circumstances and desires. When Honoria's other suitor, Hardress Barrington, offers her a cigarette, she replies:

I don't think that Mr. Trollope's heroines smoke, and I am always told that they are patterns of English young ladies. You see we Australians are under a great disadvantage, and it's rather difficult for us to decide between the morals of Mr Trollope and Ouida [104].

This cheeky pointer to the moral and stylistic ground Praed's own work falls into is also a description of the particular (and possibly debilitating) situation of the Australian reader.

Honoria is not the only troubled Australian reader we meet in the novel. Longleat's storekeeper Anthony Ferris feeds his chronic dissatisfaction by reading, while he fumes against Longleat and dreams of returning to the continent. Ferris and cattle-duffer Sammy Deans become villainous offsidiers after many long nights together reading Shakespeare and Byron and drinking whisky by firelight in a chapter entitled "The Worship of Shakespeare". For Deans, reading is a strategy for achieving social mobility in order to wreck his revenge on Longleat, whilst also fuelling his anger over his disadvantage in the world. Another figure of colonial social mobility, Lady Maggie Dolph, the cattle-rustling wife of the goofy new chum Lord Dolph, happily falls asleep on a rock while Ferris reads gloomily aloud from *Othello*: "Mr. Ferris can read poetry if he likes. I think I'll go to sleep ... I don't understand all that bosh" [124]. Young Angela Ferris constructs for herself a dreamy interior world by superimposing the Australian landscape upon creatures and myths from the stories she has read. The novel points to the question of how and why people read, and what this has to do with their own position in life.

Nora Murray-Prior's letters provide us with an intimate account of one Australian woman's experience of reading. Her responses to *Policy and Passion* are situated within and alongside stories of her own life. Nora had spent time moving in the intellectual circles of her relatives in London before returning to Sydney and training as a nurse with Lucy Osburn.³² She was twenty-six when she married Rosa's father,

Queensland politician Thomas Lodge Murray-Prior, and settled to live a life of, as she put it, "the bearing of children and the making of jam."³³ She is a perceptive critic of Rosa's work and her letters during this time constitute an extended critique of *Policy and Passion*. Reading the novel, and writing about it to Rosa, led Nora to think about how her experience of reading was affected by the circumstances of her own life and her situation in the world, in comparison to that of her literary and cosmopolitan step-daughter. She questions at every point the reasons for her own responses. She writes, "I like the Policy (which you have got up wonderfully) better than the Passion, which repels me"³⁴ and wonders whether her feelings in this regard are a product of her Queensland upbringing:

a spirit of purism seems necessarily to follow (perhaps happily) a new community, and tho it is often carried to a ridiculous pitch, I am not sure that it is not the better extreme. You are growing extremely French in your ways, in England. I prefer insipidity in my daily bread, to having it too highly spiced.³⁵

Nora finds herself, almost inadvertently, positioning herself as product and representative of the Queensland community more generally.

In approving of Praed's minor characters Nora writes: "(you will say 'truly you are the appreciator of the commonplace.')"³⁶ Noting the similarity in views on the novel between herself and her mother, she writes, "Does the likeness to what I said about the book strike you?: I fancy we are a very commonplace family and appreciate highly the delineation of what we know and recognise, but are not able to move much beyond our own experience."³⁷ There is some self-mockery in the underlining of "commonplace", but I also wonder whether this is a reference, conscious or not, to Honoria's comments on *her* reading: that what we know well seems "commonplace." For Nora, as for Honoria, reading provoked a questioning as to what kind of life they lived, or wanted to live, somewhere between the poles of the dangerous and the commonplace. I don't think that Nora Murray-Prior was at all commonplace, but rather was working out what relationship her

reading, and her desires, had to the circumstances and the limitations of her life in Queensland.

Between Praed's Introductory Note and her representation of Australian readers is what Garrett Stewart describes as "that double instantiation of the reader by petition and parable, direct address and narrative replication, which circumscribes response as a textual annexation."³⁸ A certain position as colonial reader is written into the text, though less in the conscious sense Stewart implies but rather as an effect of the circumstances of its publication. In writing about Australia explicitly for a British audience, and in dramatising the act of being a colonial reader within the novel, Praed marks out a distinct and curious process for her Australian readers: reading about themselves in a novel from and for elsewhere.

In inhabiting the position offered to the Australian reader in Praed's Introductory Note, the reviewer of the novel in the *Queenslander* imagines the responses of a presumed Australian readership. Wybert Reeve, in his production of *Passion*, anticipated the tastes of an Australian audience. Nora Murray-Prior, in reading Praed's novels and writing about them, was figuring herself as an Australian reader. Praed's novel elicited, however inadvertently, a variety of images of the Australian reader.

These images form part of the history of the more amorphous ideas of the ordinary or commonplace Australian that continue to circulate in our culture and politics. Writing, as she was, some twenty years before the Australian colonies became a Federation, this reading of Praed's novels situates the national community, in part, as a product of transnational reading practices. This is something Praed clearly knew well: we are defined not only by what we write, but also by what, and how, we read.

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