

ROBSON, Jane (n/d). *Faith Hard Tried: the Memoir of Jane Robson*. In: Stewart, Iain A. D. (ed.) (2000) *From Caledonia to the Pampas*

In his introduction to the publication of Grierson's journal and the autobiography of Jane Rotgers (aka Robson), who arrived on the *Symmetry* as a young girl with her sister and parents, Iain A.D. Stewart (2000: 25) writes:

Although it is a memoir composed in retrospect rather than an ongoing diary, this text provides equally significant insights into the settlers' existence. [...] Early in the twentieth century, towards the end of a long and eventful life and as one of the last remaining members of the party which had sailed from Leith over eighty years earlier, Jane recounted her past to an interested acquaintance, one M.R. Powell, who committed her experiences to paper for the benefit of future generations of the family.

This memoir remained unpublished until Ian A.D. Stewart edited it in 2000. Like William Henry Hudson's *Far Away and Long Ago*, perhaps the best known work within the Anglo-Argentine 'canon', it is a memoir written many years after the events retold (after her 89th birthday in 1908) and therefore mediated by a subjectivity whose views are those that memory has built. But unlike Hudson's, it is a text put together in Argentina rather than in an English-speaking country --and the author is a woman.

In fact, Jane Robson is the only female author in the series this section closes, although there will be others in later periods. Her account is generated at some point in the early twentieth century, when female narratives are no longer so unusual in the Argentine context, but it is still significant that the person who actually pens the memoir should be somebody else, 'a M.R. Powell'. This is something that Iain A.D. Stewart simply mentions in the introduction to his 2000 publication, as external to the text itself. When we encounter the text, it appears as a Jane's first-person narration throughout.

Whilst the process by which this text has survived its originator --through the filter of an amateur 'editor'-- means that we must remain cautious of accepting

it as Jane Robson's verbatim account, there is no reason to suspect that it offers anything other than an authentic rendition of her life story.

(Stewart 200:25)

However, in the manuscript that Jane Robson's family gave me in 2002, not knowing that their relative's memoirs had been published in the UK, the text opens with a paragraph leaving actual authorship in the editor's hands, so that Jane becomes an informant, someone who is in some way being interviewed, and the story is therefore framed by the narrator/writer:

James Rotgers and his wife with three children, left Leith by ss Symmetry May 2nd 1825 with 250 others, arriving in Buenos Aires on August 19th and later formed a Scotch colony at a place called Monte Grande. There has already been a record of these colonists given. I need only confine myself to the one in whose personal experiences I am deeply interested, it being a very noble, as well as an extremely hard life; it will be best for her (Jane Rotgers) to tell her own story.

There is no transition between this opening paragraph and the next, in which the voice supposedly changes to Jane Rotgers (aka Robson) herself: 'I was a little girl of five years old when I came to South America'. Having established the frame, the frame narrator, believed to be a male journalist from *The Standard*,¹ reappears in the very last paragraph, also omitted in the published version, without even a blank to differentiate the frame from the account itself. However, recurrent features of orality, such as 'I think' (81), 'Now I come to about the year 1853' (96) or 'I will now tell you about it' (97), as well as short, simple sentences, remind us throughout that we are reading the transcription of memories retold out loud.

Finally, like Thomas Whitney in King's text, Powell takes responsibility for the narrative and its faults:

¹ The family believe the memoirs were originally published by the paper and, according to Eileen Noble, who is writing a book on her great-great-great grandmother, Powell was a male journalist [personal communication]

I have come to the end of my poor effort dear Mrs. Robson, to write your most interesting and eventful life's history, and must ask your leniency for the very inferior way I have accomplished it, and trust you will excuse and forgive all the faults. It has been a labour of love. I could only wish the writing of it had been in abler hands than,

Yours affectionately
(Signed) M.R.Powell

Mary Louise Pratt highlights the gendered nature of the 'wholly male, heroic world' of the travellers she labels as the 'capitalist vanguard' (1992:155). She contrasts their work with the travel narratives of Flora Tristan (*Peregrinations of a Pariah*, 1838) and Maria Callcott Graham (*Voyage to Brazil and Journal of a Residence in Chile*, 1824). As opposed to the adventures and explorations in the open air of male travellers, who often sleep with no roof over their heads,

For both Graham and Tristan, the indoor world is the seat of the self; both privilege their houses and above all their private rooms as refuges and sources of well-being. Graham describes her house in detail, including the views from the doors and windows: initially Chile will be seen from within. [...] It must be underscored, however, that the indoor, private world here does not mean family or domestic life, but in fact their absence: it is the site above all of solitude, the private place in which the lone subjectivity collects itself, creates itself in order to sally forth into the world.

(Pratt 1992: 159)

In Jane Robson's memoir, on the other hand, the inside is clearly associated with family life, but the outside is a very strong presence, associated with hard work in the country or with the dangers of living in the days of the caudillos, dangers which will at some point enter the safe haven of the indoor world:

At this time [1828 - 1829] the country was more unsettled. Rosas was outside, and Lavalle in, Buenos Aires. There were bands of Indians wandering about who were Rosas's men. Lavalle's soldiers were also wandering about, stealing, murdering and causing the greatest alarm. It was well named 'the reign of terror'. [...]

It was a common thing for the men (those wandering ruffians) to come to the house and insist on searching it, pretending they were looking for firearms, and then they would steal anything they could lay their hands on. The climax came

one day when Father and Mr. G. were away. We had an old peon, who had been a sailor and had lost his arm in one of the many fights and brawls with the Portuguese, I think. He was such a good, faithful old fellow, devoted to Mother and us children. He saw a party of men making for our house so he ran to the door and met them. One of the party dismounted, and drawing his sword commenced threatening and striking the peon. Mother rushed forward and the soldier sheathed his sword, but instead drew his gun and levelled it at her. She, in stepping back to avoid him, fell. In an instant, our good dog 'Stout' jumped over to protect her, and stood growling and showing his teeth. The brute of a soldier slashed at him with his sword, cutting him to the backbone in three places. The dear old dog still stood his ground though the blood was pouring off him and on to my mother. I then helped to drag Mother up. At this moment, Mr. S., hearing the noise, came flying in and the men turned their attention to him. He tried to keep their attention occupied until a band of Lavalley's soldiers which he had seen coming, could arrive, but the men sitting on their horses outside saw them also, and, knowing that they would be taken prisoner, gave a shout of warning. They were all on their horses in an instant and galloped off as hard as their horses could go. (80 - 81)

[...]

At last the revolution came to an end and Rosas was in power. People began to return to the camp and their homes, and our parents decided to go also. They were feeling sad and anxious, as they did not know if they would find anything left of their home. Alas, there was little indeed left. Everything that would burn had gone, and there was nothing left but ashes. We now had to start our life afresh, and very up-hill work it was. (83)

All through this hard life, Jane can be seen as hard-working (she starts earning money by baby-sitting at the age of five) and often taking upon her shoulders what a man would do, including fighting:

I worked as perhaps no woman has ever done –I even killed animals for our meat. (93)

I grasped D's pistol with my left hand and with my elbow in his chest and my foot on his horse's side (he had a small animal) I had complete power, as my hand was as strong as his. (101)

She presents herself as a heroic character, capable of great sacrifices, never giving up and always supported by her faith (thus the title *Faith Hard Tried*). Another omission from the manuscript in the 2000 publication is the epigraph, which reinforces the idea of a pious life of self-sacrifice anticipated in the title:

Blessed is the soul that trusts its God
And feels within its utmost course,
Has fought life's battle through and through,
And defied misfortune's angry blasts,
With steady aim, not to leave,
A blot upon their name.

While living in San Vicente, 'Jean' had her fortune told:

The fortune teller said, 'Could I open before you the book of life, the first look at it would kill you. You have a very hard life before you, such a life as few have experienced, and you will feel at times that you cannot come out successfully in the end'. I oft thought of the man's words as they proved true.
(79)

This picture of the immigrant settler as self-denying, industrious and honest is a recurrent motif in the official political discourse of Argentina of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as is, in contrast, 'the idle disposition of the typical Argentinian' (Stewart 35) who is represented by the 'Gaicho vago' (the 'idle Gaicho').

In 1843 we came to 'Los Sauces'... where we had 21,000 sheep on thirds and also a large dairy. [...] I had to work night and day, for at night there were the animals to look after and collect, housework, sewing and washing to do, for I had no woman to help me. We had, of course, peones for the outside work, but they were so untrustworthy and would go off on a drinking bout or amuse themselves in their own fashion and were so much trouble to look after, that they were worse than useless. (93)

The destructive power of a 'shock of bad air', for example, which is a clear exaggeration without scientific grounding,

... serves to attribute a dimension of mysterious, unseen power to the Argentine environment, thus boosting the implicit pioneer myth that pervades Jane's story and casts the settlers' enterprise as an heroic crusade against a conspiracy of unfriendly locals and hostile natural forces.

(Stewart 2000: 27)

In Jane Robson's descriptions, her family in particular and the Scottish community in general appear in opposition above all to the violent Gauchos of the caudillos' parties, but also to the Italian and Spanish immigrants, whose culture is presented as very different

from that of the Scots and to dishonest people of every origin. The text opens with a distinction between self and other, where the other is dishonest:

I was a little girl of four years old when I came to South America, and can only very faintly remember the voyage, which to my young mind seemed endless. My father, soon after he arrived, finding that things were not as had been presented to him, decided to strike out for himself and went to Cañuelas. At that time, Rivadavia was president and the country was in the most unsettled state. I remember when we had settled in our new quarters, Father started by buying a milk cow which promptly returned to its previous owner some distance across the camp. Father got it back, but the same thing happened again and on each occasion he had to buy it over again, or at any rate pay something, such was the dishonesty of those among whom we lived. (75)

The theft of horses by passing soldiers, the misappropriation of property by creoles, Irish and Scots alike, several forms of cheating... are all obstacles to be overcome with dignity and faith. Jane often thanks God and is known to have been one of the people involved in the creation of the Presbyterian church in Chascomús, in the province of Buenos Aires. She presents herself as helpful and charitable, and the family look after seven orphan boys, whom she claims could otherwise have been subjected to slavery, which if fact had been abolished in 1813.

She also shows her courage to defend fair play and see justice done. She is ready to fight for female rights when she persuades a doctor at the British Hospital in Buenos Aires to take a female patient against the institution's protocol, which seems to have set an important precedent in the prestigious hospital which still exists today (110).

In what way does this kind of Anglo-Argentine writing express identity in the 'contact zone'? As explained on page 48, Mary Louise Pratt defines the 'contact zone' as

the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.

(1992: 6)

Livon-Grosman criticises Pratt's notion, claiming that, though well meaning in its denunciation, it ends up achieving the opposite effect, 'the polarised representation of the parties. As if to emphasise the actively harmful aspect of colonial influence it was necessary to highlight the limitations of the victim' (2003: 52, my translation). Instead, he proposes to 'approach travel literature as the product of an exchange of unpredictable scope' (2003: 53, my translation)

The contact zone which Jane Robson describes is definitely more complex than a simple victim-victimiser binary, but, in my view, Pratt does not seem to imply the reductionist view Livon-Grosman criticises:

By using the term 'contact', I aim to foreground the interactive, improvisational dimensions of colonial encounters so easily forgotten or suppressed by diffusionist accounts of conquest and domination. A 'contact' perspective emphasises how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other.
(Pratt, 2003: 7)

Jane Robson's narrative clearly shows people in the contact zone, but the power relationships are fluid, very often based on physical violence or the ownership of horses, or on the privilege of being foreign and therefore exempt from joining the army. Presenting the settlers as victims of the violent natives, the narrative never thematises the displacement of Indians and Gauchos whose lands were being occupied by foreign farmers. In a clear instance of 'othering', most of the narrative separates the English-speaking Scots from other immigrants and natives, highlighting their differences rather than forms of collaboration. When the latter is referred to, it is usually to show solidarity on the part of the Robsons.

Eighty years after the arrival of the settlers, the text evidences how little the Scottish community has blended with others and how it has gained independence and prestige:

It is now 1908. On St. Andrew's day in the afternoon we had tea and games and prizes for the children at the Manse. In the evening we had a large dance at the Robson Hall, which was greatly enjoyed by us all. In the summer of this year we had a service at our church, with the Holy Communion, followed by a ceremony of unveiling two memorial tablets –one to the memory of 'Padre' Smith and the other to Mr. Ferguson, the minister who preceded our present one. Two of the oldest members of the Scottish community unveiled them, Mr. Brown was one and I was the other. (114)

This picture of domestic life could be describing a place in Scotland, with 'tea and games and prizes for the children', a much more prosperous one than the one the settlers left or arrived at (there's a dance at Robson Hall). If faith has been 'hard tried', virtue has been rewarded. The only trace of transculturation is the use of the word 'Padre' to refer to Father Smith.

Looking back on her past in Argentina more than eighty years after her arrival, Jane Robson retells her experiences in Argentina, where she will end her days, 'for the benefit of future generations of the family'. With sixty great-grandchildren, she can certainly think of a public who will appreciate this recording of their origins. But although the 'future generations of the family' are Argentinian or Anglo-Argentine, the memoirs are written in English and will be made public by the narrator/writer in *The Standard*, the newspaper published in English. Jane Robson has kept her language though she has lived in a Spanish-speaking environment for decades and the text provides no information about her level of bilingualism.

Language is a central issue when defining the identity of the Anglo-Argentine community. English, considered the mother tongue by later generations of Anglo-Argentines thanks to the conservative work of churches and schools, has been a clear identity banner. Even though it can be inferred that the early Scottish community did not communicate in English

with people like peons and soldiers, Jane Robson's language shows very few traces of 'how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other' (Pratt 2003: 7). Besides, there is little evidence of the development of an 'Anglo-Argentine dialect', except for some lexical features: the word 'camp' to refer to an estancia (ranch) and autochthonous words such as 'peones', 'cardos', 'alcalde'. The lack of glossing in the text seems to suggest that the words have been incorporated to the narrator's vocabulary, but the words 'peons' and 'thistles' appear as well, almost interchangeably, though not close enough to the referent in Spanish to be of help to an English reader. Jane Robson seems to be addressing people like her listener / editor: Anglo-Argentines who can stick to English or spice it with touches of local colour. This opens up questions of isolationism and transculturation that are related to the prestigious social positioning of the English-speaking community in Argentina in the second half of the 19th century and later years.