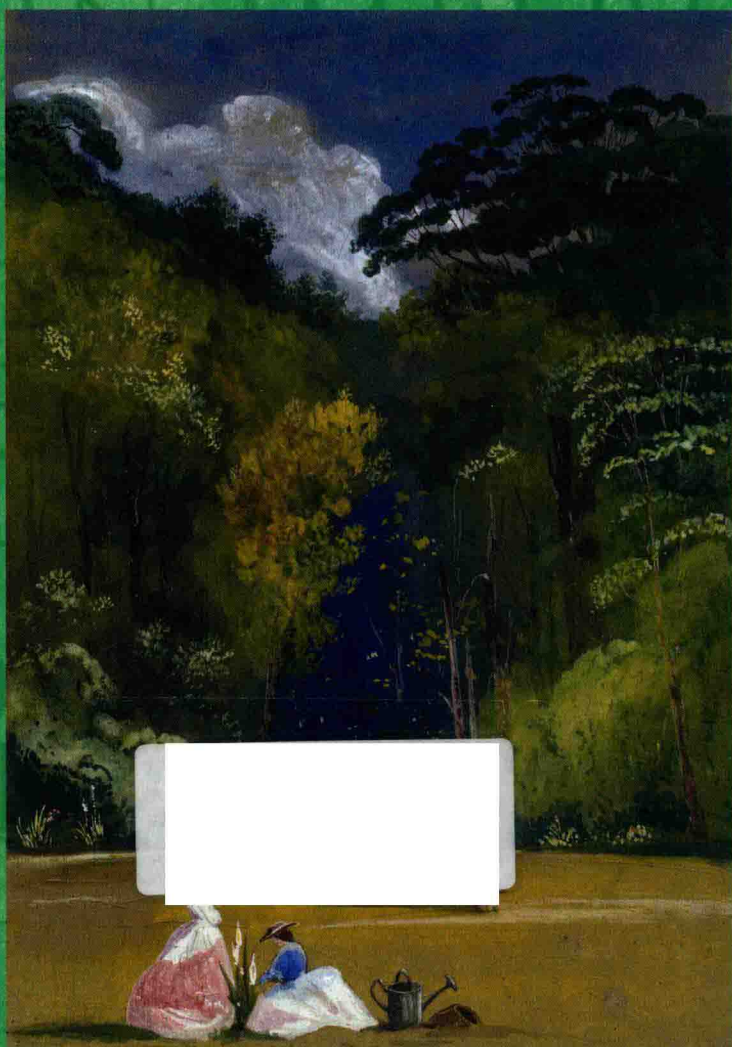


# *Genteel women*

*Empire and domestic material culture,  
1840-1910*

DIANNE LAWRENCE



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EMPIRE AND DOMESTIC MATERIAL  
CULTURE, 1840-1910

Dianne Lawrence

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*Genteel women*

MANCHESTER  
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*For Marco and Tom, and in memory of Alf and Mary*

## GENERAL EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

It is a special pleasure to introduce this book. The doctoral thesis on which it was based was examined in the study of my home in Perthshire. This happened because I had recently undergone surgery and my convalescence had not proceeded far enough to permit me to travel. In any case, there was a curious appropriateness about the surroundings. While Dianne Lawrence's book is about the maintenance of female gentility in the British Empire, we sat in a house redolent of Scottish Victorian gentility. Old Bank House was built in 1850 by a country solicitor and bank agent as a 'gentleman's residence' appropriate to his status and it exudes the style and tone of that period. No doubt the ladies of the family of this solicitor, William Yeaman, set about some aspects of a form of the gentility which Dianne Lawrence charts. The rooms, the gardens, the original coach house and servants' quarters (no longer part of the main residence) would all have invited it. With the successful conclusion of the 'viva', we were able to withdraw to the formal dining room and indulge in a lunch party which reproduced at least some of the genteel 'foodways' and presentational aspects of Chapter 5. It all seemed a good deal more agreeable than the impersonal surroundings of university offices and restaurants.

But it would be giving an entirely false impression of the arguments of this innovative work if it were to be imagined that genteel women in the Empire were merely struggling to disseminate the cultural and social norms that must have been followed in Old Bank House – and its many English equivalents – in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The central focus of the book is upon environments, the physical environment of the colonial territories covered, and the social (and also racial) environments of settlers in parts of Australia, New Zealand and the Cape, as well as administrators and other 'sojourners' (temporary residents) in India or West Africa. These various environments homed in, as it were, on the residences and gardens of such settlers and expatriates. They were expressed in the character of the rooms, the scale and nature of the verandahs, the furniture, the interior décor, the use of textiles, and much else. They were also reflected in the gardens, the flowers, the vegetables, the social lives, the modes of entertainment, the food, and the relationships with the servants of such people. Within such varied environments, women expressed their gentility through clothing, through efforts at cleanliness, through visiting

and entertaining, through gardening and flower arranging, through food preparation and presentation.

Lawrence considers that 'gentility' is a more useful category than social class in these contexts, not least because gentility cuts across gradations of class, of occupation, of income, and varieties of place. Moreover, she demonstrates that the practice or 'performance' of gentility constituted much more than the simple attempt to reproduce forms of Britishness overseas. It was a dynamic process which varied according to environmental and chronological contexts. It incorporated elements of taste, of pride, of gender identity, all of which contributed, for its practitioners, to vital characteristics of moral tone and therefore worth. Moreover, it had many aspects of hybridity about it. It constituted a set of cultural norms which responded to climates, places, and the botanical, culinary and racial situations in which it was practised. Thus gentility was able to accommodate, even promote, aspects of cultural and environmental interaction. In addition, the arrangement and delineation of gentility was dependent upon design fashions and economic forces, upon the importation of textiles, aspects of décor (such as linoleum, carpeting, wallpaper etc.), flower and vegetable seeds, adornments for clothing, tinned foodstuffs and much else. It was also connected with the appearance of new trades at the frontiers of empire, the arrival of dressmakers, cabinet makers, various types of shop, even piano tuners.

The book charts these phenomena through the medium of dress and the presentation of the body, through the vital domestic space of the living room (in which such dress would be displayed), through gardens as the outdoor expression of the home, equally central to the establishment of the genteel frontiers against the dangerous and alien environment beyond, as well as through the preparation and almost ritualistic serving of food within the home or upon the verandah. The range of sources used to arrive at this analysis has been remarkable. They include family letters, newspapers, trade directories, museum collections and the striking visual evidence of photographs. The full list can be found in the bibliography, but suffice it to say that the images and dynamics of gentility have been assessed in striking ways that should help to guide other researchers.

Of course the study is by no means comprehensive – what book can be? – but we do get hints of other aspects of gentility such as the presence and the role of males, the upbringing of children, the physical forms used to facilitate reading and writing, the appearance of new technologies and so on. Future studies may well move on to an examination of genteel bedrooms and dressing rooms, bathrooms and the rituals of washing and bathing, the presence of horses or other animals,

## GENERAL EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

the genteel use of carriages, traps, ultimately bicycles and motor cars. And of course other questions arise such as the spread of these aspects of gentility to the working classes and to indigenous peoples (or their outright rejection as a form of resistance to social or racial colonisation), as well as the manner in which such concepts and practices were modified, rejected or protected in the twentieth century. Gentility constitutes a rich seam which requires a great deal more mining. But Dianne Lawrence's book offers signposts for the ways in which this can be developed. Its great value lies in the fact that it addresses issues of gender, of colonial social life (including relationships with servants of a variety of races), of reactions to environments, of architectural and design modes, of gardening, and of the economic dimensions of the imports necessary for the maintenance of genteel manners. A rich seam indeed.

John M. MacKenzie

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is a natural development of my doctoral thesis and it is appropriate to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council for their generous funding of that initial project. I also welcome this opportunity to thank Lancaster University and its History Department for their subsequently appointing me as an Honorary Research Fellow, a status which has eased my access to archival and library sources and has helped me to keep involved as an independent scholar in the wider academic community.

A substantial part of my research has been conducted in Australia, and for their help I thank Michael Lech of the Caroline Simpson Research Collection, Sydney, Glynis John, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, the staff of the Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office<sup>1</sup> and Vickery Avery of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. A most special thanks are in order to Alison Melrose of Hobart, who has been astonishingly giving of her time, and from whom I have learnt much about Tasmanian cultural history. My work in Queensland would not have been so fruitful, nor yet so enjoyable without the assistance of the staff of the Library of James Cook University, particularly Bronwyn McBurnie who has been so very helpful in securing for me permission to use images from the North Queensland Historic Photographic Collection. For their warm hospitality, kindness and support I thank Alison Melrose, Blair Gamble and Les Bishop in Hobart, Toni McDowell in Bothwell and Alan and Jean Dartnall in Townsville.

Within Britain numerous individuals have provided me with professional assistance and I thank in particular Kevin Greenbank and his colleagues at the Centre of South Asian Studies, Cambridge University, Elizabeth Gilbert of the Lindley Library, Royal Horticultural Society, Diane Backhouse at the Unilever Archives and the staff of the Lancaster University Library. I am grateful to Sue Womersley for her careful reading of the final text, and to Emma Brennan of the Manchester University Press who has so admirably supported this work from proposal to press.

Throughout this enterprise I have been blessed to have the encouragement and support of a host of friends. I thank them one and all – for dinners cooked, for fire-sides shared – and for their indulgence in the face of my obsession with old wallpaper!

I am also delighted to have this space to voice a particular thank-you to my colleague and friend Professor Stephen Constantine of Lancaster

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For their technical support I thank Marco and Tom Lawrence, whilst appreciation of all else they give is expressed in the dedication.

My acknowledgements of the various personal and professional debts I owe would be incomplete if I did not also grasp this chance to thank Professor John M. MacKenzie, for his introduction to this book. In it he tells of the deliciously toothsome luncheon we shared in the elegantly appointed dining room of his home in rural Perthshire. In so doing he gives due recognition to the value of the domestic within the world's grander concerns, and the genteel women whose lives are considered here would certainly join with me in applauding those sentiments.

## *Note*

- 1 As from January 2012 the Archive Service of Tasmania, including the Tasmania Library and related collections, have merged to form the Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office.

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