Thirty Years in Australia

by

Ada Cambridge

AUTHOR OF “PATH AND GOAL” AND “THE DEVASTATORS”
Acknowledgements

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It is now over a hundred years since Ada Cambridge published her autobiographical memoir *Thirty Years in Australia*, and sixteen years since our New South Wales University Press re-edition. At the time of that re-edition the name of Ada Cambridge was beginning to appear on university courses, and access to affordable texts greatly facilitated the situation for students as well as contributing to the growth of such courses. The reprints *The Three Miss Kings* (London: Virago, 1987) and *A Marked Man* (London: Pandora Press, 1987) were core texts, and the re-editions *A Woman’s Friendship* (Sydney: New South Wales University Press, 1988) and *Unspoken Thoughts* (Canberra: English Dept., Australian Defence Force Academy, 1988) were also readily available for more advanced study. As well, *Sisters* was reprinted (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1989), and Louise Wakeling and I later republished *Fidelis* (Canberra: Mulini Press, 1997). Our *Rattling the Orthodoxies: A Life of Ada Cambridge* (Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin, 1991) and Audrey Tate’s *Ada Cambridge: Her Life and Work* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1991) provided valuable biographical detail and background information, and are still in demand.

Since that time the Ada Cambridge industry has continued to expand, with ongoing academic research and renewed public interest. Despite some attrition in Women’s Studies courses of recent years, and a resultant catch-22 situation whereby most of these texts are now out-of-print, Cambridge has maintained her well-deserved position
on undergraduate and postgraduate courses and is also included in some high school English subjects. Many articles have been published in scholarly journals and critical texts over the years, and much more is known about the enigmatic life and writings of Ada Cambridge. My article “Unspoken Thoughts: A Reassessment of Ada Cambridge” is now available on internet (http://www.austlit.edu.au/run?ex=ShowWork&workId=CSP), and the entry on Cambridge in the Dictionary of Literary Biography vol. 230 (USA: Bruccoli Clark Layman, 2001) provides a bibliographical resource for further scholarship. Archival investigation by Elaine Zinkhan and other researchers continues to reveal heretofore unrecorded journal publications of Ada Cambridge (especially in America).

For a number of years it has been our plan to re-issue Thirty Years in Australia, and we have had many requests to do so. The climate of 2004 was particularly conducive to such a venture. Elizabeth Morrison’s scholarly edition of A Black Sheep: Some Episodes in His Life, the Age 1888 serial version of A Marked Man, came to long-awaited fruition (ADFA, Canberra: Australian Scholarly Editions Centre, 2004), providing a background for textual study and a site of reawakened biographical interest. In 2004–5, Rodney Wetherell’s play, “Ada Cambridge Live,” was successfully staged in a number of Anglican churches across Victoria, notably at Holy Trinity Williamstown and Holy Trinity Coleraine, where Cambridge’s husband, the Reverend George Cross, was in each case vicar. Such was the enthusiasm of audiences that, had we had copies of Thirty Years, they would have sold in the hundreds. It was as a result of such requests that I finally approached SETIS, Books on Demand, where a number of other Cambridge publications are already available. It is entirely appropriate that the autobiographical memoirs of one of Australia’s best known female writers from the colonial period, documenting much of its social and cultural history, should once again be in print, as Cambridge herself believed possible.

Also in 2004–5, a book of verse, Echoes (London: William Macintosh, 1869), came to light in Berkelouw’s Head Office in Berrima and was subsequently sold to a Melbourne bookshop, The Grisly Wife. Written by “A.C.”, it is currently being attributed to Ada Cambridge, so far without conclusive evidence. As well as Hymns on the Litany (Oxford and London: J.H & J. Parker, 1865), a substantial number of Cambridge’s newspaper serials, short stories and individual poems
published in Australia also appear under the initials A.C. My forthcoming article, “Echoes of Ada Cambridge,” written in consultation with Elizabeth Morrison and Rodney Wetherell, both of whom consider that *Echoes* is almost certainly by Cambridge, documents the case for attribution and presents arguments for authentication of the text. If, as now seems likely, *Echoes* was penned by Ada Cambridge, it represents juvenilia and occasional poems written parallel to *Hymns on the Litany* and *Hymns on the Holy Communion* (London: Houlston & Wright, 1866 [1865]), but not of their quality. *Echoes* has recently been purchased by the Mitchell Library in Sydney, where it should continue to inspire definitive research. Other copies are held in the British Library and the library of the University of California at Davis.

The publishing history of *Thirty Years in Australia* has been part of this whole process of discovery. In re-editing *Thirty Years* in 1989, we introduced the names of Cambridge’s Australian home towns, represented by her with initials followed by a dash. We also completed the names of several of her friends and acquaintances, whose identities she consistently protected with initial-letter references only. In the interests of reproducing the original text, this current edition has restored Cambridge’s abbreviations and our earlier introduction has been adjusted accordingly. While Ada Cambridge’s biographical details may be well known today, thanks to the work of many researchers, for the benefit of readers a full concordance of editorial changes is given below:

pp. 20, 27, 30, 36, 37, 39, 40, 48, 49, 51, 55, 59, 78, 84, 134, 174, 179
pp. 62, 81, 88, 92, 164
pp. 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 99, 101
pp. 99, 100
pp. 102, 104
pp. 107, 109
p. 120

pp. 140, 174, 177, 178, 181, 190, 196
p. 177

W — = Wangaratta
Y — = Yackandandah
B — = Ballan
L — = Learmonth
Dr R. = Dr Cusack Russell
M — = Murndal
Archdeacon M’C. = Archdeacon M’Cullagh

B — = Beechworth
Canon S. = Canon Serjeant

Margaret Bradstock, 2005.
Introduction

In 1921 Ada Cambridge, writing to the publisher, George Robertson, suggested of her *Thirty Years in Australia* that “[b]eing essentially history of Australian old times...it is possible that it may be in demand again someday to fill out collected records”. Robertson replied that “[s]ome day it will be reprinted, perhaps, but not in my time”.1

With this current edition, his somewhat doubtful prophecy is finally, and fortuitously, realised. The surprising feature is that it has taken so long to happen. Contemporary reviews were more than positive. The *London Punch* (22 April 1903), for example, stated that it had “not read anything that more vividly pictures daily life in Australia through the growing-period of thirty years than does this unpretentious volume”. The *Morning Post* (10 March 1903) noted of its author that “[s]he holds some pronounced views regarding the social and political progress of Australia, and these are worth considering by those who would understand its conditions”. However, Cambridge’s collection of memoirs has had to wait until such time as a twofold interest in colonial Australian writing, and in the traditions of women’s writing subsumed by it, has created the appropriate conditions for a re-edition.

Ada Cambridge was born in Wiggenhall St. Germains, Norfolk, on 21 November 1844, second child of a family of ten children. By the time of her marriage, in 1870, there were only three children
surviving. Thirty-eight years later it was recorded in *The Retrospect*,\(^2\) that they were “a family . . . of two” (p. 61), with only Ada and her sister Jenny Wyllie still living.

Ada’s father Henry was indulgent but lacking in business acumen, which was probably the reason for the number of changes in his profession and the fairly frequent moves in the first two decades of Ada’s life. It was their mother, Thomasine, who “kept things together as best she could” (*The Retrospect*, p. 134). The family moved to Thorpland, Downham Market (the site of some of Ada’s most interesting childhood memories), Yarmouth and finally Waterside, Ely, where she met her husband-to-be, the Reverend George Cross. The young couple appear to have consolidated their friendship during Ada’s periods of district visiting in the parish where he served and in which he was born.

George and Ada sailed to Australia some three weeks after the wedding, not without misgivings, and this is the point at which she begins *Thirty Years*, vividly recreating for the reader the feelings and experiences of “an imaginative young person seeing the world for the first time” (p. 19). On their first journey overland to Wangaratta, for instance, Cambridge evokes the sensations experienced by George and herself on “the morning of the day, of the season, of the Australian year, of our two lives” (p. 20)—the smell of rain-washed air, the scents of gum and wattle and fresh-springing grass, and “the vast flocks of screaming cockatoos and parrots of all colours”.

George’s profession, and Cambridge’s love of “rebuilding of a new home out of chaos” (“I have thoroughly enjoyed it eight times, and should like nothing better than to move again tomorrow, provided it were to the right place,” p. 187) necessitated many moves for the Crosses—Wangaratta, Yackandandah, Ballan, Coleraine, Bendigo, Beechworth and finally Williamstown. The move from Yackandandah was also precipitated by the death of their second child, Edith Constance, in 1874; and the move from Ballan by the death of their eldest son, Arthur Stuart, in 1876 at the age of almost five. The Crosses had three more children, Vera, Hugh and Kenneth, all of whom survived into adulthood, although Hugh died of enteric fever in Queensland at the age of twenty-four. This sad event occurred in 1902, during the writing of *Thirty Years*, and for Cambridge “altered the whole face of the world and of the future” (p. 205).

In *Thirty Years* we learn not only about one woman’s opinions on the period of the Boom, the Great Strike and Federation, but also about
the loneliness of country parsonages such as that beside the Wannon River outside Coleraine, which drove her almost "melancholy mad"; the elitism of Ballan that welcomed Cambridge to its "charmed circle"; and her stoical dealings with such threats as floods, bushfires and snakes. We follow Cambridge through her earlier liberal, and then more conservative political reactions, empathise with the painful loss of her first-born children, and see her establish herself professionally.

The Crosses made their first journey back to England in June 1908 in response to a family legacy with legal business attached. For Cambridge this must have brought a welcome change of routine. Her Williamstown days had been taken up with an exhausting regime of "posts and newspapers... dinner-planning and stocking-mending... calls and committee-meetings" (The Retrospect, p. 16), not to mention writing, and consequently her health had suffered.

They remained in England for six months. Cambridge later recorded many of her nostalgic forays in her second collection of memoirs, The Retrospect. Following George's retirement, and at his instigation, they returned to England again in 1912. Ada Cambridge was, by then, so thoroughly an Australian that she referred to this move as:

"his wish, not mine, but I reconcile myself because I must, buoyed up with the hope and confident expectation that an experience of one or two English winters will give a charm now lacking to Australian life, and that he will come back while I still have a few years left to be near my children and in what, after 40 years, I feel to be my country and my true home."3

The First World War broke out during their sojourn in England, and the Crosses were soon joined by their son, Kenneth, serving in the Medical Corps in England and France, and his wife, Beatrice. (Their small son, Kenneth, known as "Bill", remained in safety in Australia.) On 27 February 1917, George died in Brighton, England, of senile decay and syncope, and within six months Ada returned to Australia to be with the rest of her family. Despite her age, and the fact that her ship was attacked by German U-boats and torpedoes missed them "by inches only",4 Ada Cambridge succeeded in reaching Australia, where she remained until her death.

Cambridge's literary career began during her early womanhood, when she published two collections of hymns5 and three exemplary
tales in Christian journals, as well as pious verse. She was also beginning to write the more secular narrative poetry that would surface later. Once in Australia, Ada Cambridge published short sketches and poems in the *Australasian* and the *Sydney Mail*. However, her first significant work was the serial “Up the Murray” (*Australasian*, 27 March–17 July 1875), a short Anglo-Australian novel which set the pattern for many of her works to come, reflecting, as it did, both the older, established world of rural England and its colonial offshoot. Cambridge’s own experiences are drawn upon in many of these works—for example, “The Murray Journey” from *Thirty Years* has many close descriptive parallels in the later novel, *Not All in Vain*.

There followed some twenty years of serial writing in Australia. Many of Cambridge’s serials were quickly republished as novels in England, and two were also taken up by the Australian publishers, Melville, Mullen & Slade. Newspapers were the main vehicle for publishing locally written novels at the time, and thus the quickest way to achieve recognition.

Once Cambridge had begun to use the literary agent A.P. Watt, a further ten novels were published between 1895 and 1914 by five different English publishing houses. She also published a number of journal articles, further short stories and poetry, and the two collections of memoirs, *Thirty Years in Australia* and *The Retrospect*. Her earlier rebellious book of poetry, *Unspoken Thoughts* (1887), evincing a strong social conscience and investigating a freeing-up of sexual mores and religious conventions, re-emerged as the rather curtailed and toned-down volume, *The Hand in the Dark* (1913). Neither collection sold particularly well, there being little demand for poetry of this nature, although sales-figures give *Unspoken Thoughts* a slight edge, reflecting, perhaps, its capacity to disturb. George Robertson later referred to *Unspoken Thoughts* as “the book which placed you among the immortals” and the poet and journalist John Farrell declared, “[i]t’s fine . . . sincerity and a thought in every line”. Although the unsold copies of this book were eventually withdrawn from sale and pulped, its ideas gained further expression in the novel immediately following it, *A Marked Man*.

While the years up to the turn of the century were not the most innovative for Cambridge in regard to the romantic novel, they witnessed a move to experimentation with form and a more philosophical cast of mind. Cambridge increasingly chose to subvert her own endings, giving us a mode closer to irony than to romance.
The emergent tradition of literary nationalism, however, tended to push her into the background along with other colonial writers regarded as outsiders, and it is only recently that her reputation has been resurrected and her technical virtuosity recognised. In particular, Cambridge’s turn-of-the-century novels reflect changing social situations and a gradual loosening-up of values. The chaperon, for example, vanishes. In her earlier fiction, Cambridge had always devised ways of ensuring that a young couple were able to be alone together (in contravention of the proprieties), but suddenly these devices were no longer necessary.

Cambridge’s publishing strategy in regard to her memoirs was the same as in the early days of her serial writing. Although it is not a well-known fact, *Thirty Years* first appeared in serial form in *The Empire Review* (1901–2), followed less than a year later by the book.16 Significant changes between the two versions may be noted. The final version, for instance, is more expansive but, at the same time, is marked by a toning down of unpalatable truths and personal information for book publication.17 Statements opposing Federal government and Church policies or procedures have been suppressed, as have many unflattering observations about Australia, and names and personal details have been excised. In *Thirty Years*, Cambridge tells us that “Up the Murray” provided her with her entrée to Ballan society, with its “old” families: “I found, if not my level, the level which suited me” (p. 94). In the serial of “Thirty Years” a much more frank Ada Cambridge expresses her awareness of caste, suggesting that “Up the Murray”

\[\text{gave me the key of the position impregnable to a society which, of its own initiative, would hardly have hailed me as a social equal—a poor parson’s wife, lawful prey and protegee of patronising tradesmen’s wives. (vol. II, p. 706)}\]

Writing of the Beechworth years (1885–1893), in her early references to her friendship with the Governor’s wife, Lady Elizabeth Loch, Cambridge indicates that she cannot speak of it “except to say that by her act and wish it took no account of the disparity in rank between us” (vol. II, p. 710). She later refers to the vice-regal lady “whom we all remember with such love—and I, as I think, with most” (vol. III, p. 155). Such comments add to our knowledge of the account in *Thirty Years*. 
Cambridge also makes it clearer in the first version that when she left hospital after being given two months to live, the pronouncement that her condition was fatal was due to a "mistaken diagnosis". She complains more pointedly about hospital conditions ("a workhouse pauper under doctor's orders could not have received less"; and "only twice or thrice did I taste poultry"). Her statement that "the lady who 'ran' the hospital was a woman of the highest character and is still my honoured friend" (vol. III, p. 553) helps explain the modifications in *Thirty Years*. Clearly, Ada Cambridge could not risk affronting her friend with too-honest recollections about the misdiagnosis, or the appalling conditions, which she attributes to the inflated cost of living during the Boom.

While many of her opinions are retained in *Thirty Years*, the earlier version gives us a clearer picture of a strong-minded woman whose way of thinking was often "against the grain". Ada Cambridge was, in fact, like many of her own characters, a "black sheep" who could not "trudge it with the faith, the docility, the contentment of the rest". As a parson's wife, she quickly made it clear that parish demands were not to interfere with her "profession", and that, in any case, organised religion had little appeal for her (though she remained a deeply spiritual person to the end).

As a mother, Cambridge appears to have been exemplary and to have loved her children devotedly, but household help freed her for the pursuit of many cultural activities, for personal jaunts and female friendships, as well as for the rigours of professional writing. A review of *Thirty Years* in the *Illustrated London News* (2 May 1903), presumably referring to a disclaimer of Cambridge's, tells us that "she never allowed her writing to interfere with what she considered her real work". Cambridge herself upheld her womanly reputation by stating that "housework has all along been the business of life; novels have been squeezed into the odd times." However, this was something of a necessary pose. In Coleraine, frequent illness, life-threatening on several occasions, freed her from household chores and allowed her to devote herself to her career. Cambridge notes that in spite of "the theory of the household that I was not strong enough to stand anything", she "still got through a large amount of sewing and novel-writing".

Shortly after the publication of *Path and Goal*, and some seven years after the move to Williamstown, Ada Cambridge became the first President of the Women Writers' Club (from 1912 known as
the Lyceum Club), which met in an upper-storey room in the Block Arcade in Melbourne. Mary Grant Bruce comments:

Mrs Cross was our much-loved President, and we numbered most of the women-writers of Melbourne. None of us had much money, but we were a most cheerful band, and often we entertained really interesting visitors from overseas.\(^{22}\)

According to Joan M. Gillison in *A History of the Lyceum Club, Melbourne*, Cambridge “was a realist and a rebel and disliked the rigid conventions of social life”.\(^{23}\) She was awarded Honorary Life Membership for special distinction.

In the last years of her life, Ada Cambridge embraced with an increasing open-mindedness such concepts as women’s suffrage and emancipation, and she demonstrated, moreover, an increasing urgency in regard to her own testament. She published nothing after the article “Nightfall”,\(^{24}\) but her correspondence with George Robertson shows a preoccupation with reprinting editions of her work. Cambridge appears to have been worried about money and her independence, but more than that she was anxious that there should be “a revival of interest in my ‘remains’ after I am dead”.\(^{25}\) She wrote a collection of stories, a sketch and a photo-play, all of which are unpublished,\(^{26}\) but it is clear that, while persuading herself she was making a “fresh start”, Cambridge was at the end of her writing powers. Robertson, whom she nominated her literary legatee, seems to have found himself in an unenviable position, and made her what payments he could for the copyrights without exercising his option to reprint. In December 1924, however, he asked permission to shorten *The Three Miss Kings*\(^{27}\) for his Platypus series. Cambridge responded that she had sold that novel outright to Mullens’ for £50, and offered *A Little Minx* in its place.\(^{28}\) Nothing came of it, but Robertson’s correspondence with her, and his gifts of books, appear to have given Ada Cambridge the kind of context she needed in her final years.

Cambridge’s last letter to George Robertson, written on 3 June 1925, comes from a private hospital in Elsternwick. She had suffered several strokes and in her letter tells Robertson that she was “nearly at the end of any possible writing power”. A year later, on 19 July 1926, she died at Elsternwick, aged eighty-one.
With typical Victorian coyness, Cambridge uses initial letters followed by a dash to represent her Australian home towns, although she occasionally forgets herself and gives things away. Likewise, she consistently protected the names of a number of her friends and acquaintances with initial-letter references only. Towards the end of Thirty Years she drops this authorial pose altogether. In general, in re-editing Thirty Years, our intention has been to remain as close to the original as possible. Details provided by Cambridge, as well as early spellings and one or two grammatical infelicities, have been retained for the sake of authenticity. The text is not an annotated edition, or intended as a scholarly treatise, and those readers wishing to know more of the “facts” are recommended to our life of Ada Cambridge, Rattling the Orthodoxies. Nor have we corrected a number of chronological errors in regard to her diary entries (for example, she reports one of her expeditions from Ballan to Ballarat as taking place on 10 September 1873, yet there is evidence that the Crosses still lived in Yackandandah at that date).

Cambridge’s base structure for Thirty Years was provided by her diaries, referred to by her on many occasions but so far undiscovered. Perhaps Cambridge herself destroyed them along with most of her personal papers before returning to England. Whatever their fate, they were significant in providing the raw material for those sections of her narrative characterised by an attention to domestic detail and the rhythms of ordinary life, an attention which amounts to a kind of “female naturalism”, as this recurring characteristic of women’s writing has been termed.

Thirty Years is not merely personal reminiscence, however fascinating that may be. Although based on “facts”, the book is, as well, a collection of opinions, self-justifications and interpretations. While Thirty Years is an early example of the tradition of literary and theatrical reminiscences that has become popular in the 20th century, it also draws on several other genres that proliferated in the 19th century. A wealth of travel and descriptive writing, as well as history and biography, was produced by writers seeking to explain and interpret aspects of life in the colonies for an English market. Written by both insiders and outsiders—of the latter, Anthony Trollope is perhaps best known—such books of reminiscences often contained anecdotes about literary and historical figures, and described regional characteristics and local customs. Thirty Years combines a treatment
of significant events in one woman’s personal life with discursive episodes on subjects ranging from the connection between bush architecture and the national character, to intellectual and artistic life in Sydney in the mid-1880s and labour unrest in the 1890s. The opinions and tastes expressed in *Thirty Years*, and the way in which the socio-historical scene is filtered through an individual sensibility, contribute to an understanding of Ada Cambridge the woman and writer, as well as of the more public events of her period.

Cambridge establishes the authenticity of her memoir by incorporating letters from friends, quotations from books, newspaper editorials and journals of the period, as well as selected jottings from the diaries. *Thirty Years*, then, exists in a middle space between public and private writing. Narrative and discursive elements alternate and intermesh here in much the same way as they do in Cambridge’s novels, where the narrator frequently breaks off her story to expound on some issue arising from the turn of events. In Chapter II, for instance, called “Australia Felix”, Cambridge criticises Australian writers who exploit such “romantic institutions” as Bret Harte mining-camps and real bushrangers as opposed to “imitation bushrangers” like the “cowardly Kellys”. Considering that her friend “Rolf Boldrewood” achieved fame for writing on just these stereotypes, Cambridge’s statement borders on the disloyal!

She may well have been firing a discreet broadside, too, at other Australian storytellers who dealt with the more sensational aspects of the bush, and who were beginning to be canonised as more authentically Australian than the colonial writers who preceded them. Cambridge’s realist attitude towards the use of sensational stereotypes is that “our local story-writers love to pander to the delusion of some folks that Australia is made up of them; I can only say—and I ought to know—that in Victoria, at any rate, they have not existed in my time”.

Broadly speaking, the narrative thrust of *Thirty Years* is one of chronological linearity. However, when we look more closely at the way Cambridge traces the events of the years between 1870 and 1900, the structure of *Thirty Years* is seen to be much more discontinuous than first appears. Cambridge constantly disrupts the narrative flow with digressions and comments that draw attention to the status of “life-writing” about the self as an imaginative construct. At times, she becomes so involved with her subject that she runs on ahead of herself, as with her discussion of the Boom and Bust years.
She is then forced to back-track in order to pick up the thread of the narrative.

As well, Cambridge often makes aesthetic decisions about her raw material, rearranging and telescoping the action at certain points, presumably to avoid slowing down the pace with unnecessary detail. Instead of taking the reader through the daily tribulations of a sea journey under sail, for instance, she moves from homage to the way the old sailing ships touched “the heart and the imagination” (p. 9), to the sighting of Cape Otway in Victoria seventy-seven days later. At other points in the narrative, such as her account of the years in Ballan, Cambridge’s inability to deal emotionally with personal bereavements necessitates further gaps in the record.

Moving forwards and backwards in time, Cambridge compares and contrasts past with present, though not usually with the rather one-eyed nostalgia so common to memoirs written by those yearning for “the good old days”. Being essentially a realist, she asserts quite early in her narrative that although she is sensitive to the disappearance of many valued features of her past, she is “not one of those who, having outlived them, insist that the old times were better than the new” (p. 8). She remains as committed to the present as to the process of retrieving the past, constantly up-dating her readers on current events or the lives of those people whose paths she once crossed.

Through the strategy of interweaving the events of her individual life with social, political and economic commentary, Cambridge seeks to account both for her sense of self and for the nation’s identity, a year or so after the coming of Federation. After what must have seemed like constant movement across the length and breadth of Victoria, she had finally come to a resting-point in Williamstown, beside the sea. In 1901–2, when Cambridge was writing the first version of Thirty Years for The Empire Review, she was fifty-seven; she was already launched not only into the “lonely seas” of old age, but also into the uncharted waters of the twentieth century. National affairs had by then developed along certain paths that to Cambridge’s sensibility were regrettable and disillusioning. Two such trends were represented by the fact that the Labour movement had begun to press its demands through the machinery of parliamentary democracy, and that an increasingly powerful Federal government was spreading its bureaucratic tentacles into every area of Australian life, including that of the private citizen.
To some extent, Cambridge’s narrative involves a kind of stocktaking, a review of the road taken, and a weighing-up of the possibilities for the future, both for herself and for the country with which she now closely identified. Despite the pessimism of the rhetorical closure in *Thirty Years*, its tone of loss and despair at corruption and greed in the young nation, Cambridge still retains her faith in the coming earthly millennium. Unrealistically, perhaps, she looks to the day of emancipation and enlightenment that will make Australia “as great as it is good” (p. 210). Towards the end of the final chapter, in a last patriotic gesture, she hands out bouquets to the Australian press, to the resurgent pastoral interests and to the idea of Australia itself, which was meant, she says, “to be a great country”.

*Thirty Years in Australia* can be viewed as a hybrid form of writing which Domna Stanton, in her study of women’s life-writing, has described as “autogynography”. Cambridge herself regarded *Thirty Years* as a “chronicle” (p. 8); its object, she argued, was “to reflect in my trivial experiences the character of the country as modified by its circumstances from year to year” (p. 123). Elsewhere, Cambridge describes *Thirty Years* as “intimate disclosures” (p. 114), a term which suggests that at least some of the time she considered the personal element in her narrative to be central.

Nonetheless, Cambridge frequently legitimises her narrative in terms of educating and informing the reader—in particular, the English reader—about the forces that had helped to transform a group of isolated colonies into an emergent nation. Before giving an account of her beloved Dutch friend Diederik, for instance, and his well-bred unfitness for pioneer life, Cambridge justifies the inclusion of his case with the comment that “it is so distinctly characteristic of the country and as such may be instructive to the English reader” (p. 38).

Likewise, her near-fatal illness of 1886, a subject which Cambridge assumes would “disgust the patient reader” (p. 123), is apparently only included because of the light it throws on the Boom economy of the 1880s. These comments of Cambridge’s in the course of her narrative indicate a strong desire to establish a literary-historical respectability for her text, a respectability that sometimes sits quaintly with her evocation of the intimate scenes of domestic life. It is almost as though she were anticipating criticism of her chronicle as being
merely a woman’s book, merely the record of thirty years of more or less trivial pursuits.

She does, however, allow for the fact that some readers may be looking only for “a little amusement for an idle hour” (p. 149), and thoughtfully structures her discussion of industrial unrest in the 1890s as an optional chapter which such a reader “may like to skip”. Cambridge’s defensiveness is expressed in humorously self-denigratory tones. She was, after all, usurping the masculine domain of journalist or political and social commentator rather than merely adopting the more private voice of harmless memoirist. “It is not for me, a fellow-guest, to play reporter”, she says primly in Chapter XII. She then proceeds to sketch an amusing vignette on the contrast between the tennis etiquette of the distinguished globe-trotters Lord and Lady Rosebery, and that of working-class Australian “holiday trippers of the ’Arry and ’Arriet type”.

Cambridge frequently prefaces a political or economic discussion with the disclaimer that she is not at all qualified to speak authoritatively on such matters. Before exploring the origins and progress of the Great Strike of 1889–90, for example, she refers to herself as “unlearned in the subject” of “politico-industrial matters” (p. 149). She nonetheless goes on to argue convincingly that no picture of her Australian life can be made clear “unless I sketch in a line or two to indicate surrounding social circumstances of the larger kind”. The “line or two” somehow swelled into a chapter or two, if we include her earlier account of the period of Boom and Bust, and her concluding chapter. In Cambridge’s discussion of the bursting of the Boom, too, her public pose is indicated by the ingenuous statement that “I said I would not meddle with figures, which are not in my line” (p. 127); at the same time, she cites dividends and statistics for several pages in a perceptive analysis of the frenzied speculation of this period.

Just how intimate are Cambridge’s “intimate disclosures”? As in most life-writing, whatever the revelations selectively made in Cambridge’s text they are inevitably outweighed by the omissions. All writing which attempts, in Stanton’s terms, to graph the auto engages to some degree in this process of self-censorship. Limitations are inevitably imposed both on and by the narrating “I”; in Cambridge’s case, married to a clergyman with pronounced views and ambitions of his own, it is likely that consideration for his feelings and his position in the Church acted as an invisible brake on Cambridge’s headlong impulse towards self-revelation.
Constrained as she was by considerations of taste and propriety, and being unwilling to betray the hospitality of others, Cambridge allows herself only to hint that such strictures prevent her from elaborating further. Of the "great house" Ballanee near Ballan, for instance, with whose owners and in whose intellectual circles she mixed socially in the mid-1870s, Cambridge says regretfully "I wish I could describe [it] in less vulgar terms" (p. 94). She nonetheless adopts the mask of discreet insider in relation to the precise details of personalities in this group.

Cambridge herself states that "propriety" acts as a constraint upon writing more fully about "contemporaries yet living" (p. 34), and confines herself largely to sketching in her friendships with those who, for the most part, are dead. The gallant but rather wooden Diederik, or Dik, Maria, the station-manager's daughter who was also Cambridge's maid, and Mary Price, wife of Colonel Tom Price of the Mounted Rifles, are just three of the faithful friends whose personal histories she touches upon, while still preserving the mystique of their identities.

The Ada Cambridge whose persona is re-created in Thirty Years is in many ways a product of this same belief in propriety and good taste, and is as much a fiction as any of Cambridge's own romantic/realistic heroines. Cambridge is, in fact, one of those whom Patricia Meyer Spacks has called "selves in hiding"35, caught up as she was in the mores of a class-bound, Empire-conscious, male-dominated colonial culture. This makes it the more remarkable that in Thirty Years Cambridge allowed herself to reveal so much of her personal situation as a woman and as a writer, and of the details of her daily existence. There are hints, for instance, that domestic dramas were not unknown in the Cross household, and that the family had a constant struggle to make ends meet owing to its commitment to the accoutrements of respectable middle-class existence. (A taste for Aucher Freres pianos, smart buggies, George's particular weakness for blood horses and his desire for private school education for his sons drained the family finances considerably, as did Cambridge's need for household assistance of all kinds during her years of illness.) There are hints, too, that the interests of clerical husband and literary wife diverged sharply over the first thirty years of their life together.

These potential "warts", however, are presented in Cambridge's narrative as picturesque, instructive or humorous. Her commitment
to mythologising in the areas of finances, families and friendship is quite obvious to the modern reader; for example, instead of dwelling on the Crosses’ genteel poverty in making their own furniture, Cambridge presents this as colonial self-reliance and a willingness to “make do”. The reminiscences of an essentially Victorian, white, middle-class British-Australian woman are only as intimate as the period allowed, so that on some intriguing subjects Cambridge reveals next to nothing.

We do not learn, for instance, the nature of the disappointment experienced by the Crosses in Wangaratta, except for Cambridge’s tight-lipped assertion that “[l]ife there was difficult or worrying on the professional side” (p. 51). We can only speculate whether, as for Nancy and her parson husband in *A Little Minx*, life in a small Victorian country town was made irksome by power-wielding Church superiors and their wives, or by influential but essentially vulgar parishioners. Certainly, Cambridge seems to enjoy tantalising her reader with the hint that the disappointment “came from a quarter whence it was least expected. But, as to that, bygones may be bygones at this time of day. I shall not tell tales” (p. 31). The very choice of words here indicates that some offence was committed in Wangaratta, possibly by another clergyman or a patron of the church, an offence that must once have rankled very much with the Crosses. Conflicts between certain parishioners and George certainly characterised many of his later appointments in country towns, and Cambridge’s refusal to conform to the role of a parson’s wife possibly made her enemies as well. No doubt those involved in the disappointment at Wangaratta were still alive when *Thirty Years* was published, and were potential readers of her book. Such practical considerations aside, to purvey the details of a private disagreement in one’s memoirs would not have been playing by the rules.

As in most writing which attempts to document the elusive self, there are other significant gaps in Cambridge’s “self-inscription”. She does not, for instance, reveal the precise nature of her illness in 1886, though we may gather from her final article, “Nightfall”, that it was gynaecological and possibly related to a miscarriage. Revelations of this kind, except for brief allusions to childbirth or delicate hints of pregnancy on the mission trail, lay outside the bounds of what in Cambridge’s period could be discussed with propriety. Neither does she deal very fully with her relationships with her children,
apart from revelling briefly in her sons’ achievements at school. For feminist readers, the omissions are particularly glaring in regard to Cambridge’s daughter, Vera, of whom we learn nothing in *Thirty Years* except that her birth, two weeks after the death of Cambridge’s first-born son, saved her from despair. Other than that, Cambridge hints only that Vera was a good cook! Similarly, we have Cambridge’s brief but heartfelt acknowledgment of Hugh’s death, but none of the circumstances.

These personal omissions aside, Cambridge’s remark to George Robertson on the value of *Thirty Years* in filling out collected records indicates that she clearly recognised the inadequacy of official records in capturing the historical specificity of life in the past. In *Thirty Years*, Cambridge expresses the view that she is

a hopeless sceptic in respect of the printed history of the past. “It may have been thus,” think I, when I con the so-called authentic records of my race in this or that particular, “but I wish I could have been there to see for myself.” (pp. 114–5)

It is this perception—that the partial “trUTHs” afforded by official history need to be mediated by reference to the material conditions of ordinary lives—that is fundamental to an appreciation of *Thirty Years*.

It is fitting that Cambridge’s retrieval of a significant fragment of Australia’s past should now become part of a more general act of retrieval by feminist readers and critics of a long-neglected and widely disparate body of writing by Australian women. Whatever reservations readers may now have about Cambridge’s experiential narrative, and its reference to her “life” (the presumption of referentiality), her main concerns were broader. She, too, sought to understand the process of social and political change, and to disrupt and question the too-easy assumptions of democratic nationalism on the nature of the Australian identity. For feminist readers in particular, the re-edition of *Thirty Years in Australia* contributes in a major way to that process which has been described as “think[ing] back through our mothers” — or perhaps, more accurately, through our great-grandmothers.

We may not always like the opinions Cambridge canvasses so forcefully in *Thirty Years*—she is no Marie Pitt or Catherine Helen Spence—but her views throw light on the thinking of those who
constituted middle Australia at the turn of the century. It was a sector which felt ill-at-ease at the perceived threat to social stability posed by the growing radical Labour movement. Thus in Chapter II, where Cambridge is at pains to represent Australia to the English as “quite steady and respectable”, she plays down the idea of wild times in Australian social history by suggesting that mining has been a “sober pursuit” in this country, and that the Great Strike of 1890 was the only occasion she could think of “[i]n the way of public rowdyism”. She does not mention vocal demonstrations by the unemployed in the depression years following the Great Strike.

Cambridge does not appear to have felt any sympathy for what to her were the spurious grievances of organised urban labour, although she expresses indignation at the plight of non-unionised workers and the really oppressed, especially women and the Chinese. Ironically, in Chapter XVI, she assumes a proletarian mask, pronouncing that “as a worker myself I feel beyond measure for those who are unfairly hampered in what is so stern a struggle at the best”. Her examination of the Great Strike in this chapter is clearly prejudiced, referring as it does to conservative editorials found in such newspapers as the *Argus*. These views nonetheless derive from Cambridge’s own historical specificity. As Gillian Whitlock has suggested in her introduction to *Eight Voices of the Eighties*, Australian women have written from within their place in the dominant culture and hence, in comparison with each other, represent “real differences of race, class and historical condition”. Only by acknowledging this are we able to move towards a clearer appreciation of Cambridge’s contribution to Australian literature.

ENDNOTES

1 Angus & Robertson Papers, 17 January 1921 and 10 February 1921, Mitchell Library.
4 See “A Wartime Voyage” from Cambridge’s late unpublished writings, Fryer Library, Queensland University.

6 *The Two Surplices. A Tale* London: Joseph Masters, 1865; *Little Jenny* London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K.), 1867; *The Vicar’s Guest* London: Joseph Masters, 1869. Two of her stories won prizes in connection with *The Parish Magazine. Little Jenny* and *The Vicar’s Guest*, assumed by critics to be no longer extant, have recently been rediscovered in the Bodleian Library by the editors. Copies have been placed in the University of NSW Library.

7 “From the Battlefield Goodnight”; “A Great Secret”; “Counsel”; *Sydney Mail* 18 February 1871; 20 January 1872; 16 March 1872. “Bachelor Troubles”; “The History of Six Hours”; “At Sea”; *Australasian* 31 August 1872; 15 February 1873; 28 June 1873.


12 London: Heinemann, 1913.

13 Angus & Robertson Papers, 16 December 1924, Mitchell Library.

14 Angus & Robertson Papers, 28 June 1922, Mitchell Library.


16 London: Methuen, 1903.
19 *Thirty Years* p. 32.
20 *Thirty Years* p. 113.
21 London: Methuen, 1900.
24 *Atlantic Monthly* 130, August 1922, pp. 231–4.
25 Angus & Robertson Papers, 22 October 1924, Mitchell Library.
26 These are kept in the Fryer Library, Queensland. A copy of the stories, *The Good Old Times*, is also in the Mitchell Library, among the Angus & Robertson Papers.
28 Serialised in the *Sydney Mail* 17 November 1885–5 December 1885; London: Heinemann, 1893.
30 *Thirty Years* p. 95
33 Domna Stanton (ed.) *The Female Autograph* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, p. 5. This term is particularly relevant to Cambridge’s narrative, in which, as in other “autogynographies”, the “fundamental alterity” of the female subject is dramatised “even as it asserts itself discursively and strives towards an always impossible self-possession” (p. 14).
36 London: Heinemann, 1893.
38 See the discussion by Jane Marcus of Virginia Woolf and the importance of women’s collective history in Carol Ascher, Louise DeSalvo and Sara Ruddick (eds.) *Between Women* Boston: Beacon Press, 1984, p. 394.
39 Whitlock *op. cit.* p. xxi.

Louise Wakeling and Margaret Bradstock, 1989.

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Ada Cambridge as a young vicar’s wife in Victoria.  
*La Trobe Library, Victoria*

George Cross, Cambridge’s husband.  
*KSS Cross*

Cambridge in her later years.  
*KSS Cross*

With children Vera and Kenneth.  
*KSS Cross*
TO
MY TWO LIVING CHILDREN
AND THE DEAR MEMORY OF ONE
WHO WAS LIVING WHEN I WROTE IT
I DEDICATE THIS BOOK
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