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Positioning Jessica Anderson's The Commandant *as a work of biofiction*

Abstract:

Historical novels have the ability to provide unique insights into untold histories. In this paper, I examine the ways in which Jessica Anderson's 1975 novel *The Commandant* seeks to represent history through fiction. Anderson used historical sources and her own keen insight to create a rich and complex portrait of Patrick Logan, a man who is immortalised in folklore as one of Australia's greatest tyrants. The themes of authority, abuses of power and how the colonial past shaped Australia's identity had great resonance to Anderson's contemporary readers and are still relevant in the present day. I argue that in the case of *The Commandant*, historical fiction offered the opportunity to tell a story that had been excluded from mainstream official histories in favour of dominant hegemonic interpretations. Anderson subverted the traditional biofiction of a man of importance, feminising the masculine history of Patrick Logan and the Moreton Bay convict settlement and telling much of his story from the point-of-view of the soldiers' female family members. I focus on her fiercely forensic approach to historical research and how she applied this to her writing practice to produce a work of historical biofiction that shines a light on a foundational period of Australian history.

Biographical note:

Merran Williams is currently completing her first novel *Flight of the Badger*, a historical fiction based on the true story of a convict escape from Van Diemen's Land, as part of a PhD in Journalism and English at La Trobe University. She teaches in the university's Department of Politics, Media and Philosophy.

Keywords:

Jessica Anderson, The Commandant, convict narratives, historical biofiction, women writers

> Historical fiction shows rather than reports. It gives us the voice and attitudes of the characters, not the academic voice of a narrator. It invites us into the privacies of a person's soul. Its value lies in its revelation of what it felt like to be a particular person at a particular place and time.
>
> – Vreeland, 2011, p. 37

Introduction

This is an analysis of Jessica Anderson's *The Commandant*, the Australian author's only work of historical fiction and the novel she considered to be her finest (Willbanks, 1992, p. 21). Published in 1975, *The Commandant* suffered from what Anderson considered to be inappropriate cover art – she later attributed its lack of success to the publisher's decision to commission an illustration for the front that made the book look like a 'Regency romance' (Baker, 1987, p. 24). It was Anderson's next novel, *Tirra Lirra by the River*, that catapulted her to literary fame, winning the writer her first Miles Franklin Award in 1978. While Anderson's fraught family dramas were her greatest successes, *The Commandant* has received less attention than it deserves. A 2012 edition published by Melbourne publisher Text under its 'Classics' umbrella put this underrated novel back in the public eye. However, it deserves a wider readership, as the writing is as fresh and relevant as it was in the mid-1970s and the novel offers great insight into the political and domestic power structures underlying Australia's colonial past.

Anderson said many of her works examine how different people wield authority and the resentment that springs from this (Willbanks, 1992, p. 21). *The Commandant* exemplifies this, subtly detailing the undercurrents swirling through the Moreton Bay penal settlement, within the convict and soldier communities, as the inhabitants react to its commandant's rigid governance. Most of the characters in the novel are based on real people and all the key events are taken from history. In this article I argue *The Commandant* demonstrates that well-researched biofiction is able to present a historical story that is as compelling as non-fiction history, because it gives the novelist freedom to fill the gaps in the documented past.

Genesis of *The Commandant*

Anderson became interested in Patrick Logan's story in the early 1970s, when she received a writing grant and began researching the story of Eliza Fraser, the Englishwoman shipwrecked off the Queensland coast in 1836 and taken in by the Badtjala people of K'gari (so-called, Fraser Island) (Barry, 1992, p. 47). As she settled into research at Sydney's Mitchell Library, Anderson came across intriguing correspondence relating to the death of Patrick Logan, who

controlled the Moreton Bay penal settlement at the site of present-day Brisbane, from 1826 to 1830. Anderson had spent her childhood in Brisbane, so this intimate connection to Moreton Bay pulled her to the story. "What attracted me so strongly was that it was my home ground. When I explored around Brisbane, in the area where Logan was murdered, it all became so visible, so feasible" (Anderson in Baker, 1987, p. 24). She stretched her one-year grant to three and plunged herself into intensive historical research, filling notebooks that are now also held in the Mitchell Library (Anderson, 1963):

> Growing up [in Brisbane] I had heard the story of Logan's murder as a child and I felt I knew how it could have happened. I liked searching out the story, lifting it gradually out of the past. So much detailed research – it changed me. It changed my attitude to the beginnings of this country. (Anderson in Baker, 1987, p. 24)

The Commandant is set in 1830 during the final months of Captain Logan's life and the aftermath of his disappearance during an expedition to explore the upper reaches of the Brisbane River. A Scottish-born British soldier, Logan fought in the Peninsular War and the American War of 1812 before being sent to New South Wales (Cranfield, 1967). While serving as commandant at Moreton Bay, he undertook several expeditions into the region and became the first European to chart much of what became known as Brisbane (Cranfield, 1967).

When the novel opens, Logan is waiting for orders to go to Sydney to testify in a libel action he brought against the editor of a Sydney newspaper for accusing him of 'murder, terrible cruelty, and failure to report the murder of prisoners by their gang overseers' (Fraser, 1964, p. 451). The reader sees the commandant through the eyes of his sister-in-law Frances, who is a fictional creation, and a number of historical personages including his wife Letty, soldier's wife Louisa Harbin, surgeons Henry Cowper and James Murray and prospective commandant Captain Clunie. Logan's own motivations and feelings remain a mystery to the reader. Anderson said she could find aspects of herself in all her characters, except Logan: "That's why we never see through his eyes. We never get into his head. His thoughts are never given" (Anderson in Grenville & Woolfe, 1993, p. 7). She did not tell the story from his point-of-view because: "I'm too unlike him. It was better to carry the story through characters I can identify with" (Anderson in Grenville & Woolfe, 1993, p. 7).

The Commandant belongs in the genre of historical biofiction because "it seeks to [recreate] what evolves in that character, the truth according to that character" (Alvaraz in Lackey, 2014, p. 28). Like a biographer, Anderson undertook extensive research to create a plausible portrait of Logan, as seen through the eyes of the people (imagined and historical) around him. In this sense, as I will explore later, the novel can be viewed as a work of biofiction, defined by Michael Lackey as a fusion of biography and novel (Lackey, 2014, p. 2). Lackey proposes that the protagonist of a work of biofiction must take the name of a real person (2016), but while this story revolves around Logan, it is not told from his point of view: rather than excluding *The Commandant* from the definition of biofiction on these grounds, I argue that its approach can broaden our understanding of biofiction as a genre. Maureen Ramsden finds "a narrator of fictional history can give the reader a more immediate sense of historical events than the factual narrator" because they can seamlessly fill any holes in the empirical history (Ramsden, 2011, p. 348). "[I]n factual accounts there may be gaps in the narrator's knowledge as some events

have not been recorded" (Ramsden, 2011, p. 348). Anderson uses literary devices such as fictional characters, imagined dialogue and interior monologues to fill historical holes, including the invention of the character of Frances to provide a counterpoint to Logan's authority figure.

Anderson preserves the mystery behind Logan's death by disclosing it through the eyes of the real-life surgeon Henry Cowper who only witnesses the aftermath (Anderson, 1975/2012, pp. 348-385). The historical record is unclear as to whether Logan was killed by local Indigenous people or escaped convicts. Commandant Clunie's official report commended Cowper for his efforts to locate Logan and notes that he "discovered the dead stinking horse in a creek and not far from it, at the top of the bank, the body of Captain Logan, buried about a foot underground" (Pain & Kenny, 2009, para. 7). Anderson weaves this fact into her narrative, enriching it with Cowper's silent speculations:

> As Henry looked up at the hill, he narrowed his eyes in an effort to approximate Logan's faulty vision … The crowd of blacks standing in the shifting shadows of the leaves must have kept as still as the trunks of the trees. Henry wondered if that immobile massing had been a simple show of strength, their first warning to the commandant to turn back. (Anderson, 1975/2012, p. 353)

Anderson savoured the in-depth research necessary to write Logan's story and the many small details described in the novel, such as the name of ships and the correct positioning of buildings in the Moreton Bay settlement, add depth to the narrative. She delighted in the "luxurious" process of spending three years delving into colonial history (Grenville & Woolfe, 1993, p. 5). Accuracy was important to Anderson and her notebooks are peppered with questions for her brother Alan Queale, who she termed "a natural antiquarian" (Anderson in Grenville & Woolfe, 1993, p. 5), such as:

> Ask Alan
>
> What was slop clothing?
>
> Why does the letterbox stop there?
>
> Runaways and aborigines [sic]= brutality towards?
>
> How? Were they armed?
>
> Colonial fever?
>
> Logan's body - not preserved?
>
> Burial with natives?
>
> Preservation of body. (Anderson, 1963)

When Alan read the final book and queried whether stocks were used as punishment so early in Australia's history, Anderson was delighted when it turned out she was correct (Anderson

in Grenville & Woolfe, 1993, p. 5). Despite being fiction, Anderson's descriptions of events and character motivations are firmly founded in facts gleaned from her research. She meticulously pieced together her story and characters from letters, diaries and newspapers of 1820s, finding that using a factual story as the novel's structure made it easier to mould than an earlier work of contemporary fiction (Anderson in Grenville & Woolfe, 1993, p. 12). Anderson considered the novel to be her best work, saying: "I do think it is firmer than any of the others, I don't think there are any of those little parts where I've come to grief and skated cleverly over it" (Anderson in Baker, 1987, p. 24).

> With *The Commandant* I had no doubts because the historical framework was so firm that I had fewer choices. I was full of doubts with my first novel until I had thrown most of it away, and could see a shape emerging … So evidently I have to invent in order to tell the truth. Objective truth is so misleading. No, really, I believe the truth can be better told imaginatively. I honestly do. (Anderson in Grenville & Woolfe, 1993, p. 12)

Anderson's imaginings fill the gaps in the historical record, providing deep insight into the events and characters of the period, especially the notorious commandant.

The Commandant as biofiction

Biofiction is closely tied to non-fiction biographical writing through the intensive research required to reconstruct a historical figure and the speculative nature of interrogating their thoughts and motives. Like a biographer, Anderson undertook extensive research to create a convincing portrait of Logan, going beyond the monster of folklore to construct a complex character: a conflicted, duty-bound soldier, enmeshed in political wrangling and as much a victim of circumstance as the convicts under his command. By placing her reconstruction of Logan in a fictionalised world told through the narrative arc of a novel, she produced a work of biofiction. The novelist's depictions of historical figures are based on fact but include more intimate glimpses than the historical record usually allows, as can be seen in Anderson's description of Logan through the eyes of soldier's wife, Louisa Harbin:

> He laughed when he had finished, throwing back his head. Louisa always thought it wonderful how his face, so cold and stoical in repose, could be recast by laughter into this mask of a satyr. It was goatish rather than equine, the Roman satyr rather than the Greek, and like everything else about him, Louisa disliked it. (Anderson, 1975/2012, p. 49)

This demonstrates the freedom experienced by the writer of biofiction. In this passage, Anderson's creative imagination animates the one known portrait of Logan, now owned by the State Library of New South Wales. Painted in 1825 by an unknown artist, it features a man dressed in rich red military garb, the starched white points of his collar reaching almost to his ears. His expression is pensive and unyielding, the lips set in an almost straight line. It is the face of a man who does not appear easily amused, so Anderson's decision to describe what he

might have looked like when laughing provides an extra layer of detail that brings Logan further to life for the reader than if the portrait itself was described note for note.

As well as providing evocative textual imagery about its subject, biofiction is able to include the reactions of various characters to events, such as Logan's feelings about his imminent recall and the possibility of testifying at a libel trial in Sydney. Anderson makes conversations between Logan and his wife, Letty, the key to understanding this. On the day Clunie comes to Moreton Bay, there is an expectation that he will relieve Logan of his command at some point, but the written orders have not yet arrived. Anderson illustrates his frustration in a discussion with Letty. As he dresses for bed, Logan says he wishes he could purchase some farming land. Letty replies:

> "Where would we get the money? You heard what James said. How would we stock the land?"
>
> "Murray's father sold his commission."
>
> "By the time we could a'wange that, we may be in India."
>
> "May we? How do I know? Have I heard from my commanding officer? I know nothing. I hear nothing. I am cut off." (Anderson, 1975/2012, p. 148)
>
> "I will tell you this. If Macleay's letter does not come by the next ship, I will write to the governor." But then he said, as if in indignant reply to someone else's suggestion, "No! I will not. It would betray anxiety. I won't do it!" (Anderson, 1975/20125, p. 149)

Anderson knew of Logan's interest in farming from his letters. In her research notes she wrote:

> Talk of taking land - farming - outback wives - P.L. [Patrick Logan] Speaks of his determination to farm in Scotland. Holding himself to it against his real inclination.
>
> Letty: Blinding himself! (Anderson, 1963)

Letty's understanding that Logan was a military man through-and-through and would never leave the service for another career, also comes from the historical record. Following the end of the Napoleonic wars, like many soldiers, Logan was let go from the army at half-pay. He returned to the family home in Scotland but was unable to settle into farming life and re-joined his regiment in 1819 (Buchanan, 1999, p. 2). By illustrating Logan's state-of-mind through Letty's perceptions, Anderson shows how the colonial government's bumbling bureaucracy affects both husband and wife. While Logan's story has been told before, seeing it through Letty's eyes gives it a freshness and originality, as well as deeper understanding of how military wives might have felt about the way their lives could be upended by the government at any moment. Describing Letty's attitude to the lack of news from headquarters, Anderson writes:

> "Only muddle, Fwances," she had said in reply to Frances's questions. "All our lives are bound by muddle and mails." She fragmented the worry with her laugh, and waved

> it away with her hands, but it always seemed to reassemble, out there in the air, and float back to resettle on her. (Anderson, 1975/2012, p. 174)

Feminising the settler-colonial story

Creating a work of biofiction rather than a traditional biography gives authors the ability to provide additional perspectives and search out lost voices. Although Logan is the focal point of *The Commandant*, Anderson built a story around him that was dominated by women. In this way, she creates a novel that moves beyond the known to a liminal space "in which writers can recover, rediscover and even recreate 'lost' stories, subjects and marginalised histories", which James Vicars notes, particularly applies to women's lives (Vicars, 2018, p. 66).

Susan Sheridan places publication of *The Commandant* at a period in the mid-1970s when historical novels by Patrick White, Thomas Keneally and Thea Astley "were challenging central myths of white settlement in Australia" (Sheridan, 2012, p. 121). Anderson joined this cohort in providing wider perspectives of Australian history; in her case using the colonial setting to deliver insights into white women's lives and experiences. Logan is the centre of the book, but she brings the stories of the settlement's white women to the forefront. According to Sheridan, Anderson's choice of a feminine perspective into what was traditionally a male history, could be seen as part of a 1970s revolution where novelists and historians alike were challenging past histories by publishing revisionist alternatives (Sheridan, 2011, p. 13). Unlike feminist histories such as *Damned Whores and God's Police* (Anne Summers, 1975) and *The Real Matilda* (Miriam Dixson, 1976), *The Commandant* is not predominately about women. But in subtle ways, it sheds light on the lot of womenfolk at Moreton Bay, often using their observations to reveal facets of Logan's personality.

Anderson's deliberate feminisation of a traditionally masculine settler story – that of the soldiers who oversaw the convict settlements – has the effect of adding a rich layer of complexity to the history. Anderson studied the novels of Gaskell, Edgeworth, Thackeray and Dickens to perfect her dialogue, calling Dickens "the closest thing to an audio tape we have" (Anderson in Grenville & Woolfe, 1993, p. 5). She described the novel as "Cranford at Moreton Bay" in a letter to her agent (Sheridan, 2012, p. 124). Sheridan acknowledges that this was likely done with irony but claims "there is a parallel between the penal station and [Gaskell's] Cranford as a suffocatingly enclosed social space" (Sheridan, 2012, p. 124). Like many a nineteenth century heroine, soldier's wife Louisa Harbin longs for convivial company, telling a departing Letty: "At these outposts it is a great alleviation to have one or two persons of one's own sex to whom one can speak one's mind" (Anderson, 1975/2012, p. 194).

The colonies were a strange place for the British. In the same way that following regulations to the letter forced Logan to apply military discipline to civilian prisoners in a form that did not work for its environment, the social hierarchies governing the women confined them even more closely than if they were back in Britain. Unable to walk outside without an escort, tormented by heat and insects and forbidden to even use the outdoor privy, the non-convict women were

kept inside to such an extent that their skin colour was different from the menfolk, as can be seen in this description of Letty and Logan:

> Letty, who left the house so seldom, showed no variation, either in face or body, of the creamy colour of her skin except in three whiter mounds of breasts and belly … although the skin of his body was paler than hers – being of that white with a tint of blue … his face and upper neck, his hands and wrists, were red and blotched and coarsened. (Anderson, 1975/2012, p. 148)

Anderson then uses this passage to add another stroke of detail to her portrait of Logan.

> Once, when she had remarked on this variation, telling him it was like embracing two different men, he had put a hand on a thigh and looked at the contrast with surprise. He showed very little awareness of any aspect of his appearance other than those dictated by his training. (Anderson, 1975/2012, p. 148)

Anderson found many aspects of herself in the three key women: Louisa, Letty and Frances, telling an interviewer: "particularly Frances, though the other points of view are well within my own range" (Anderson in Grenville & Woolfe, 1993, p. 7). Despite her sheltered existence, Anderson calls seventeen-year-old Frances: "my witness and commentator" who in her radical views serves as an "opponent" to Logan (Anderson in Grenville & Woolfe, 1993, pp. 4, 8). The young Irishwoman arrives at the settlement to provide companionship to older sister Letty, and, hopefully, find a husband. Through Frances's immature and sheltered eyes, readers are exposed to snapshots of the barbarism that defined the convict system. While Anderson does not describe the actual flogging of the convict Martin, she has Frances rush to the hospital following an accident to her nephew, to be confronted with its gory aftermath:

> a table on which lay a small thin body covered in blood from neck to heels. A man in grey was holding the ankles with one hand and sponging blood from the buttocks with the other…Now that the attendant had washed the blood from the buttocks they rose from the rest of that body, from the stringy blood-stained legs and the raw bloody shredded mess of the back, as round and fresh as the buttocks of a child. (Anderson, 1975/2012, pp. 281-282)

When Frances confronts her brother-in-law about what she had seen, he is so sure he has administered justice fairly, he doesn't comprehend she is criticising his actions:

> "Sir, when I went to the hospital, I saw Martin."
>
> "Did you indeed? I would not have had that happen. Such sights are not for women. Poor girl … I allowed myself to be swayed by the intercession of your sister. Martin had only a hundred."
>
> …

> She folded her hands and turned on her brother-in-law a long wondering look. She was accepting defeat with incredulity, but without complaint, her will paralysed by the commandant's obliviousness. (Anderson, 1975/2012, p. 308)

Even more than general historical fiction, creating a work of biofiction like *The Commandant* forces the author to remain focused, with every moment described in the novel connecting to Logan in some way. A conversation between the acerbic Louisa Harbin and Letty reveals Louisa's resignation at her soldier husband's fraternisation with convict women and links directly to Logan, disclosing his distaste for the practice: "They would not have dared," she said, "if Captain Logan had not been at Dunwich" (Anderson, 1975/2012, p. 193). This leads to a revelation from Letty, that she once saw Logan and his servant on "one of his nocturnal sorties" where they were embarking on a surprise inspection of the convict barracks:

> "I thought they were like two hunting dogs."
>
> Louisa, of course, knew that Letty did not think her husband entirely noble, but this was the first denial of nobility she had ever heard her make. (Anderson, 1975/2012, p. 193)

Letty's ambivalence about her husband's actions is echoed by Clunie, when Logan takes him on a tour of the slab huts that were used to house the convicts before the barracks were built:

> "When I came, these were all I had to use. At night I used to hear them trying to get out and run." He held one foot parallel to the wall, a few inches above the ground. "Scratching just there, between the slab and the earth, trying to get out and run."
>
> Clunie nodded, looking only at the commandant's boot. He could not look at his face. The boot seemed poised to stamp on fingers. A fine war, he thought, for a Peninsula veteran. (Anderson, 1975/2012, p. 71)

By referencing the Peninsular war and connecting the commandant's war record to his administration of convicts, Anderson questions the brutality of the penal system with a subtlety that would be impossible in a standard historical biography. Biofiction absorbs historical facts and reveals them in intimate moments, as uncovered thoughts or simple actions that drive the narrative forward and continually inform the reader about the motivations and character of the protagonist.

Captain Logan's yoke

Commandant Logan's strict application of military discipline against the convicts made him notorious in colonial society of the time. He was barely dead before the famous song "Moreton Bay" immortalised him in Australian history as one of the convict system's most brutal officials. The author of the ballad is unknown, but there is speculation it could be the work of Frank "The Poet" MacNamara (Brownrigg, 2016, pp. 6-8). MacNamara never served time at Moreton Bay, but he spent several years at Port Arthur and would have met men who did

(Reece, 2005, para. 4). The song describes Moreton Bay as being the worst of the feared places of secondary punishment:

> Captain Logan he had us mangled
>
> All at the triangles of Moreton Bay.
>
> Like the Egyptians and ancient Hebrews
>
> We were oppressed under Logan's yoke.
>
> Till a native black lying there in ambush
>
> Did deal this tyrant his mortal stroke. (Gregory, 1994, para.3-4)

Anderson represents Logan's fellow officers as uncertain about his methods of discipline. "Yesterday [assistant surgeon] James Murray had murmured to Clunie his first suspicion that under Logan too much had been done by rule instead of by need" (Anderson, 1975/2012, p. 394). Those serving under Logan became unsure where the line should be drawn. What seemed clear cut when Logan was administering justice became cloudier when outsiders brought a fresh perspective and civilian sensibilities were taken into account. Ruth Blair calls this insight a revelation of "the uneasy coexistence of gentility and brutality in these outposts" (Blair, 2006, p. 20).

In his investigation of Australian biofiction, Marc Delrez notes the tendency of writers such as Robert Drewe, and later Richard Flanagan, to "subordinate fictional writing to a revisionary examination of the ideological conditions prevailing at the nation's origins" (Delrez, 2018, p. 121). Considering *The Commandant* from this perspective, Logan's story transcends fictionalised biography and tells a deeper story about the impossibility of reconciling military rule over civilians on the fringes of the British Empire. The authority she describes is more poorly suited to its environment than colonial administrators ever acknowledged. Anderson is able to view the incompetence of colonial bureaucracy from a 1970s perspective, a period when scandals such as Watergate made it particularly obvious that governments were fallible. She has claimed that the novel is an exploration of the concept of authority: "who has it, how well or badly they use it – who accepts it, and who resists it. Especially who resists it and how" (Anderson in Grenville & Woolfe, 1993, p. 4). Sheridan argues that in telling this story, "she achieved … both a perceptive account of the workings of power, and a contribution to changing understandings of white Australia's past" (Sheridan, 2011, p. 16).

Anderson is unflinching in her description of the harsh conditions endured by convicts at the settlement, so brutal that some were prepared to escape into the tough bush fringes where they ran the risk of dying a lingering death from starvation or being killed by the local Indigenous people (Fraser, 1964-65, p. 442). But she is non-judgmental and provides context for the everyday brutality. For example, when Captain Clunie, soon to be Logan's replacement, arrives at Moreton Bay, surgeon Henry Cowper senses Clunie has heard rumours about the

commandant's behaviour at the settlement and attempts to provide some background. Speaking of 1828, two years earlier, he comments:

> A bad year. Not one of us survived unchanged. Drought. The entire crop failed. Everyone on half rations. Trachoma, dysentery, scurvy. And ship after ship bringing more men to feed than food for those already here. (Anderson, 1975/2012, p. 137)

Cowper's oblique exculpation of Logan segues into a direct defence and he reminds Clunie that an inspection by the colony's chief medical officer the previous year had found no issues with Logan's work: "he went back to Sydney full of praise for the good effects of the commandant's strict discipline" (Anderson, 1975/2012, p. 137). In championing Logan's administration, the surgeon is indirectly referring to the libel case Logan brought against Edward Smith, editor of the Sydney newspaper, *The Monitor*, in the months before his death and which provide a possible motive for his reckless explorations (Jones, 2002, p. 132). Anderson introduces the libel action through Frances, creating a scenario where she is staying with the editor's daughters in Sydney before travelling to Moreton Bay. During the visit she is exposed to and absorbs the strong feelings felt by radicals towards Logan and his system of punishment.

> "Is Mr Smith Hall such a monster?" cried Frances; but Louisa put a hand on her arm and said peremptorily, "Not so loud!"…She lowered her voice but still spoke with passion. "Mr Smith Hall would not have them worked in chains." (Anderson, 1975/2012, p. 33)

In the notes Anderson made from her archival research, she wrote in detail of the circumstances behind the libel case, and how the unpopular Governor Darling pressured his subordinates to sue at every opportunity, in an attempt to stifle criticism (Anderson, 1963). Logan was ordered to relinquish his command early so he could come to Sydney and prosecute his libel action before taking up a new command in India. In the novel, Anderson reveals the doubts some of Logan's fellow officers were feeling about the commandant's conduct. In an exchange with Clunie, Cowper says:

> "Perhaps Swann died of his twenty-five [lashes], perhaps of dysentery. There's a doubt. There's no doubt in Grady's case. And yet in neither case can it rightly be called murder. Or so I tell myself." (Anderson, 1975/2012, p. 138)

Punishments administered at the settlement demonstrate Logan's implacable, narrow-minded sense of duty. The whole convict system was modelled on military lines, with public floggings and executions of reoffenders intended to intimidate other convicts into good behaviour. Like Norfolk Island and Port Arthur, Moreton Bay was a place where recidivist and mutinous convicts were sent in order that "the sun's heat would bake and baste the sin out of them" (Hughes, 1988, p. 441). Anderson saw Logan's investment in his military identity as his downfall, because it was undermined by his inability to compromise his harsher impulses for the sake of political expediency. Her nuanced creation is far from being a psychopath who delights in tormenting charges. Instead, Logan appears to be a conscientious soldier, using

military discipline to maintain order, unable or unwilling to accept that the settlement's rigidity was its undoing.

Anderson gives Logan tender moments with his children and wife, filling in gaps of history with glimpses of the domestic, a viewpoint missing from most stories about "great" men. Logan is seen lifting his sleeping daughter gently from his bed and returning her to her own, stroking his wife's thigh and comforting his young son (Anderson, 1975/2012, pp. 258-261). But when Letty requests mercy for some convicts, he responds: "Why should I ask it for two vicious scoundrels? Say no more on the subject if you please!" (1975/2012, p. 262). Letty keeps quiet as "[h]er habit of subservience to him would not let her launch herself against such a tone" (1975/2012, p. 263).

Nineteenth century British wives were bound by marriage law to obey their husbands, and they were equally vulnerable as widows. In the histories of Logan's life, which focus on his explorations around Brisbane, there are brief mentions of his widow's fight with the British Government to receive a pension (Cranfield, 1967, para. 4). Anderson uses this historical fact in *The Commandant*'s final collision between the masculine world of the penal station and its feminine inhabitants. Accompanied by Louisa, Letty seeks out the new commandant to ensure the final report of her husband's death makes no mention that he might have been murdered by runaway convicts rather than killed by the local Indigenous people. She also requests that any question of suicidal recklessness on her husband's part be expunged from the record, as there was no definitive proof of it (Anderson, 1975/2012, pp. 416-418). Her approach is so subtle, that the new commandant does not at first grasp her meaning. He finally realises Letty is telling him that Logan must officially die as a result of active service so she can petition for a pension.

> Over her distorted face there passed such an expression of bitterness and weariness that Clunie was never to forget it, and was to wonder, in later years, if she had had in that moment a premonition of the long-drawn and humbling intricacies into which her role as appellant would take her: of petitions rejected, indefinitely delayed, or simply lost; of favours granted only to be withdrawn, of the army agent's tax taken from the pittance granted at last. (Anderson, 1975/2012, p. 419)

It took fifteen years and unswerving effort for Letty to finally receive a government pension of seventy pounds a year (Cranfield, 1967, para. 4). This sad reality reflects the underlying story Anderson was telling, of the concept of authority and people dependant on government orders. Logan is a soldier attempting to fulfil the role of a bureaucrat, fretting about concerns such as the lack of horses, trying to keep up with the precise record-keeping demanded by his superiors, and insensitive to the nuances of politics and diplomacy. He admits to Clunie: "there are a thousand new regulations. Paperwork is not in my line" (Anderson, 1975/2012, p. 71).

The characters in *The Commandant*, especially Logan, struggle with forces beyond their control. Logan is at the mercy of the mails, waiting for military orders that have been deliberately postponed. By exploring the Queensland wilderness, he takes back control and frees himself from the constraints of office. After Logan's disappearance, Cowper remembers the change that would come over him whenever he embarked on an expedition: "[it] induced in him a taut animation and gait resembling the state of a man freshly in love. Away from the

balk and perplexity of governing men, he had moved with enormous relief into government by nature" (Anderson, 1975/2012 p. 350). Discussing the report on his death with Clunie, Lieutenant Edwards speaks of Logan's love of mountains, saying, "It wasn't a matter of fine scenery … the stonier and lonelier, the better he liked them" (Anderson, 1975/2012, p. 424). The historical record shows that in 1828, Logan successfully climbed 1356-metre Mount Barney, the highest peak reached by a European man of the period (Cranfield, 1967, para. 3). Anderson's fictional imaginings gives this fact insight and poetry, bringing the reader closer to Logan than would be possible in a standard biography.

Conclusion

Filling the gaps of history is an absorbing process that takes us back in time and demonstrates the universality of the human experience. By writing a work of biofiction, rather than a non-fiction biography of Logan, Anderson presents the many sides of a complex man, at the same time as telling women's stories, previously excluded from mainstream official histories in favour of dominant hegemonic interpretations. Anderson subverted the traditional biofiction of a man of importance by feminising the masculine history of Patrick Logan and the Moreton Bay convict settlement and telling much of his story from the point-of-view of the soldiers' female family members. Anderson's fiercely forensic approach to historical research enabled her to fill historical gaps in a plausible and seamless way, shining a light on a foundational period of Australian history.

Anderson acknowledged that her lived life was as present in *The Commandant* as any of her contemporary novels, saying: "I often say that fiction springs from observation, memory and imagination. There's always a touch of memory there, even though you may not recognise it at the time" (Anderson in Grenville & Woolfe, 1993, p. 8). When combined with her intensive research, the result transcends the historical record and provides a unique and powerful portrait of a man defamed both during his lifetime and after it.

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