

THE FLIGHT OF THE MIND: WRITING AND
THE CREATIVE IMAGINATION
Conference Paper

The Flower Hunter: The Search for the
Elusive Ellis Rowan

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Peering into people's private lives can feel a little like rooting through their rubbish bin on a dark night. There's no law that says you can't do it, but you feel a tiny bit guilty all the same.

Poking about in other people's lives awakens the voyeur in us all, but can one really recreate another person's life, let alone their mind's imaginings and dreams, their hopes terrors and loves? Especially someone long dead, whose existence has been reduced to shoe boxes full of old invitations, tattered dinner menus, faded photos and long ago newspaper articles ... And that's if you're lucky!

Biographer Lytton Strachey spoke of the biographer's art as 'the most delicate and humane of all the branches of writing'. Delicacy is an apt word for writing a biography about Ellis Rowan, Victorian flower painter, explorer and adventurer extraordinaire, for although she lived a life larger, fuller and more public than most women of her time, she was in fact elusive by nature, as elusive as her alter

ego, shy little Bill Baillee, her pet bilby, whom, she said, 'sharply resented any attempt at familiarity from strangers'.

Ellis Rowan was born near Melbourne in 1848, the eldest child of pioneering stock. As a child, her school holidays were spent on the family's property in the western district of Victoria, where her creative mind was nurtured as she roamed freely in the bush, studying and capturing nature in her sketch-book. Always a dreamy child, her flights of fancy were about travelling the world, and as a schoolgirl dreaming what she would do when she grew up, she announced that 'she would go to the moon if she could.'

Like one of the exotic butterflies she painted, her mind was a bright and lively thing indeed. Curious, quick, witty and imaginative, she dared to be different to other women of her time. Her creativity was expressed as much in the life she carved out for herself, as in the plants, butterflies and birds of paradise she deftly captured in glowing detail in her watercolours.

She was not content to be a mere flower painter or 'drawing-room dauber like other women painters of her time, her ambition drove her far and wide over the most inaccessible and inhospitable terrains of Australia, New Guinea and beyond, to seek out the rare and exotic plants and flowers for which she had a lifelong and abiding passion.

One of the things that make creative people such interesting subjects for biographers is that they tend to stand out from the crowd, even if they don't mean to. They do things differently, see things differently, approach life differently. Ellis's niece, Maie Casey, once said of her aunt, 'for much of her life she lived

solitary, dedicated, in a universe of heightened visual perception.” She was seen by many as quite bizarre, unconventional, and often misunderstood, and this put her often at odds with the society of her time. The Melbourne matrons frowned disapprovingly at her strange comings and goings. Why did she spend months far away, amusing herself with her paints, instead of looking after her husband and child?

She lived at a time when most people guarded their privacy closely. Like other respectable people, she lived in fear of scandal, for women especially your name in the newspaper was tantamount to notoriety, yet after her husband died, and she had to earn her living as an artist, she courted publicity and earned herself a reputation as a tireless self promoter!

Taking those boxes of faded photos and newspaper eulogies and evoking a flawed and contradictory human being such as Ellis, as opposed to the mythical persona of ‘intrepid and tenacious lady painter and adventurer,’ which she constructed for herself, was quite a challenge. As well as being a great painter, Ellis could be very creative with the truth when it suited her. In short, she was something of a fabulist.

At this point I have to make an admission. Until December 2003 neither my wife and co-author, Christine, nor I had ever heard of Ellis Rowan, although Christine had a keen interest in botanical art. We were on holiday in Tasmania and on our first day in Launceston we dropped into the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery to see an exhibition of paintings by John Glover. Wandering through to the next gallery from the Glovers we were confronted by these vivid, and wonderfully executed, watercolours of exotic flora and fauna. Who was this

amazing artist? The tags said Ellis Rowan, but we were none the wiser and determined to find out more. This of course was the travelling exhibition organised by the National Library of about 100 of Ellis's work which went round some of Australia's regional galleries that year.

We discovered that Ellis had written a book in 1896, which she entitled *The Flower Hunter*—a good title for a book!—and that there had been a book written about her in the 1950s. Ellis's book had been compiled from the numerous letters she had written to her husband and family throughout her married life, and from her recollections of her visits to New Zealand after her husband's death.

On reading this account of her travels in Queensland and New Zealand, we set out to unearth as much information as we could. That was when we discovered that Ellis was not one to let the facts interfere with a good story and her timelines were all over the place. In short, the details in the book were as unreliable as a NSW railway timetable. As for some of the stories she told—well frankly they were a bit hard to believe. Ellis had been forced to implement her income after her husband's death by writing articles for various newspapers and magazines about her travels, and she was intent on keeping her readers enthralled, to the extent that she at one point even declared that she had ridden on the cowcatcher of a train on its way to Longreach—a claim which was patently untrue.

The more we searched, the more conflicting the stories became, and inaccuracies showed up. It quickly became clear that the biographers would speedily have to turn detective.

We decided to travel in her footsteps where possible, imagining what it must have been like to undertake these journeys over a century earlier, when there were no jet planes, limousines and comfy buses. However, our first stop had to be here in the National Library by asking to see Ellis's paintings. It was then that we discovered that the National Library housed the largest single collection of paintings by any one artist in any one institution anywhere in the world, and we clearly weren't going to have the time to see all of them. But those that we did see served to urge us on in our quest, so wonderful are they.

We began our journey at Ellis's family home on Mount Macedon, only to discover that, apart from a couple of small streets named after her sisters Mabel and Blanche, all traces of the Ryan family—before she became Rowan she was a Ryan—had been wiped away by the terrible Ash Wednesday bushfires in 1983. The beautiful Queen Anne house with its huge and exotic garden on which her father had spent over \$1 million in today's currency were no more. It was an inauspicious start. At the foot of the mountain we visited the little graveyard where Ellis and many of her family were buried. It was a bleak, icy-cold day and we wondered where to go next. We decided to go next to New Zealand, where Ellis had spent her early married life and where she had been so happy.

It was here that we discovered that the biographer needs the skill of the trained detective. It was the custom in those days for many diary writers never to mention friends names for fear of compromising or embarrassing them, so they would appear merely as initials—an infuriating practice as far as modern biographers are concerned! One such example was Ellis's account of staying with a Mr & Mrs H at Ferngrove in Urenui, in the north island of New Zealand. The stay had apparently made a great impression on her. It wasn't much to go on. Luckily we had found, in

Melbourne, the visitors books for Cliveden, the magnificent house owned by Ellis's cousin Lady Janet Clarke and her husband. In them we had found the names of a Mr & Mrs Halcombe of Urenui, so these had to be Mr & Mrs H. Once in Urenui we started in the graveyard—obviously a fertile starting point for digging up the past if you'll forgive the pun. It was, alas, another horribly cold and rainy day, and after half an hour walking up and down the grave stones we finally found Arthur Halcombe's. We wondered if there might be any descendents still living in the area and asked at the local general store, to be told that there was indeed a Halcombe living literally just round the corner. But it turned out that he was in Europe and the girl who was looking after his house gave us the phone number of his cousin. We phoned her and discovered that Arthur Halcombe's great grandson still lived at Ferngrove and we were able to visit the house where Ellis had spent such a happy time, and where we found the visitors book which included her visit.

Another amazing find came about in a quite extraordinary fashion. We had learned from reading what existed of the Ellis Rowan papers here in the Library that her only son, Eric, or Puck as he was commonly known, had died in Africa and that there was some sort of scandal which had been hushed up. To this day nobody knows exactly what Puck was doing in Africa, but at the time he went to Mashonaland—now that troubled part of the world called Zimbabwe—British Mounted Police units, reinforced by mercenaries from various countries of the Commonwealth, were busily engaged in trying to subdue bloody insurrections by the local natives. The reports of Puck's death said only that he had died there and to most of those back home it would have been assumed that he was killed during the fighting.

We wrote to the National Archives of Zimbabwe asking if they had by any chance details of the death of the young Eric Rowan. We didn't really expect a reply and indeed none was forthcoming for months. We had just about given up hope, when one day a brown paper parcel arrived at home covered in about forty Zimbabwean stamps, about \$5 worth in our money. Inside it was a manila file and in the file all the details of the death of Ellis's only child.

The records showed that Eric Rowan, far from dying a heroic death fighting Mashona tribesmen, had in fact died in Umtali Gaol where he had been imprisoned for forging a cheque. All the indications were that he had been kicked to death. A sad end for a boy who had had a much neglected childhood.

When it came to Ellis's travels around Australia, and particularly Queensland, the time lines were particularly difficult. It was now that her actual paintings became valuable, for a great many of them have dates and place names written on the back and we started to follow her line of travel through them. In this we were greatly assisted by Dr Judith Mackay's detective work for her wonderfully detailed and illustrated catalogue, *A Flower Hunter in Queensland*, which accompanied the 1990 exhibition of Ellis's work at the Queensland Museum in Brisbane. Dr Mackay had painstakingly researched old boat and train timetables, as well as old newspaper cuttings, to ascertain Ellis's real route through Far North Queensland.

In this way we were able to chart Ellis's physical progress, as she poured her passion into her work, illustrating the flowers she discovered with intricate detail onto large sheets of green or grey paper, so quickly and so accurately that no pencil drawing was first required.

Her inner life, on the other hand, was still a closely guarded secret. There were tantalising hints along the trail of a woman who clearly had deep feelings, but she took great pains to hide anything that might reveal her vulnerability. It did not fit with the image she had created. Yet she suffered all the griefs, losses and reversals of fortune that most humans experience in life, and rather more than some.

The appearance of things was most important to her, and this included her personal appearance, of which she was always most careful. As her painter friend and mentor, Marion North, recollected of their painting trip together in Western Australia, in 1880: “The ladies gossiped about her, why did she put that stuff on her face, why did she wear Paris models to stroll in the bush?”

The Victorian world was a place where few people articulated their deepest feelings, perhaps not even to themselves. In Ellis’s case, her deepest emotions and vulnerabilities expressed themselves more in what she did rather than what she said.

There seems no greater evidence of Ellis’s inner suffering, than the bizarre action she took in 1899 while living in New York. At the age of 51, already widowed and now reeling from the news of her son Puck’s untimely death, Ellis made an extraordinary decision. Call it vanity if you will, but looking in the mirror at her grief-stricken and probably over exposed complexion, she clearly did not like what she saw, so she decided to change it. Most creative people like to experiment, but on this occasion Ellis’s imagination took full flight from the experimental to the foolhardy. At a time when such procedures were at a very experimental stage, she had a face-lift. The surgery left her with what relatives described as a ‘sad, fixed expression’, so unlike her former self that when she came back home to

Australia in 1906 her relatives hardly recognised her with her 'new' face now framed by unnatural-looking, bright red, hennaed hair.

Biographer Hazel Rowley has suggested that the biographer's job is to be part historian, part detective and part novelist. It is also, I might add, to be part psychologist.

"Biography", André Maurois said, "is a means of expression, when the author has chosen his subject, in order to respond to a secret need in his own nature." In psychology this is called transference. To this Leon Edel adds: "From the moment a biographer responds to 'a secret need in his own nature' he is tangled in his emotional relationship with his subject— he is in trouble." In short, biographers need to be very aware of their own 'stuff'.

When the material is thin, as is often the case when writing about inner lives, the biographer must, however, use all his intuitive skills to make connections, all his understanding of human nature, behaviour and motivation out of which human beings express themselves. Like a good psychologist it also helps if you admire, like, or even love your subject a little!

Leaving all that aside, there is one great and abiding mystery which overshadows all others in an exploration of the life of Ellis Rowan—and that is: Why has a woman who was so revered in her day, was so brilliant an artist, and who produced over 3000 marvellous paintings in her lifetime, been all but forgotten in her own country?

In 1927, the journalist Henry Tardent, one of Ellis's greatest admirers, published a book entitled *Mrs Ellis Rowan and her contributions to Australian Art and Science*, in which he asked 'what has Australia done to honour and commemorate the name of one who has done so much for her?' He answered his own question. "Up to now very little."

Here we are in 2009. Nothing has changed.

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