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Francis Adams: Realism and Sensation in the 1880s

Meg Tasker

The English-born traveller and writer Francis Adams, who was in Australia from 1884 to 1890, was a cultural activist and a conduit in both directions for the late-Victorian migration of ideas. His book *The Australians* (1893) was an important source for the 'Legend of the Nineties',¹ but there was a good deal more than the celebration of the Bush in his Australian writing. He was a keen critic of Britain's management of its empire, and a sensitive observer and analyst of social and cultural life in the colonies. Stephen Murray-Smith described Adams' impact on his contemporaries as that of an 'active intellectual [...] who brought something of "modernity," of sophisticated European modes, to the discussion of Australian problems' (14). He expressed progressive views on sex, marriage, and the rights of women;² Marxist theories on class war, property and power;³ a huge amount of sympathy for the working class (whose poverty he sometimes shared, but to which he did not belong);⁴ and 'advanced' notions about art, literature and science. His respect for science came in part from his father, Andrew Leith-

1 Adams has been cited as an exponent of the myth of the bushman by radical nationalists, e.g. Vance Palmer in *The Legend of the Nineties* (1954) and by others, e.g. G.A. Wilkes, in 'The Australian Legend,' *The Stockyard and the Croquet Lawn* (1981). See Tasker, 'Francis Adams's Construction of the "Real Australia"' for a fuller discussion.

2 These range from celebrating the freedom of Australian girls from 'rococco' British conventions of femininity, romance and marriage (*The Australians* and 'A Bush Girl' in *Australian Life*) to sympathetic lesbian characters (*John Webb's End*) and the 'New Woman' (*Lady Lovan*). For an annotated bibliography (online), see Tasker, *Francis Adams: A Bibliography*.

3 Adams had a grounding in German socialism via the works of Karl Marx and the American Marxist Laurence Grönlund, whereas most Australian socialist writers of the time (e.g. William Lane, John O'Farrell) were more influenced by American writers and activists Edward Bellamy and Henry George (Tasker, *Struggle and Storm* 101).

4 As demonstrated in *Songs of the Army of the Night* (1887), e.g. 'A Visitor in the Camp' (25).

Adams, an army surgeon and natural historian who corresponded with and greatly admired Charles Darwin.

The focus of this essay is on how Adams' first two novels can be read in relation to late nineteenth-century categories of literary and popular fiction, via two terms ubiquitous in reviews and publishing of the day: 'realistic' and 'sensational'. The phrase may seem tautological to twentieth- or twenty-first century readers, whose ideas about realism may align it with representation of the everyday. However this was not the case in the late nineteenth century: British newspaper reviews and advertising feature the phrase frequently in relation to novels, plays, and other forms of entertainment, the emphasis being on spectacle as well as verisimilitude.⁵ Such generic flexibility as Adams demonstrates in his fictional output between 1886 and 1889 calls for a nuanced understanding of literary culture in Australia in the 1880s. This is particularly true with regard to definitions of 'realism', but it applies also to ideological and gender-based assumptions about popular genres such as 'sensation' and 'romance'. Adams' 1888 essay on 'Realism', and contemporary debates about realism within which it was published, remind us that colonial press and literary establishments were both responsive and hostile to ideas and trends from the northern hemisphere – not simply British, French, and American, but filtered versions, such as British accounts of French naturalism.

Adams, recently arrived from London and Paris, was an alert reader of contemporary literature, and interested in realism as practiced and theorised by the French authors Émile Zola, Guy de Maupassant, Gustave Flaubert, and their predecessor, Honoré de Balzac. His first Australian publications were essays on literary topics for journals in Melbourne and Sydney. While in the east Australian colonies, he published five novels, a collection of short stories, two books of verse, and a good deal of journalism for both mainstream and radical newspapers. He wrote in many genres, including a New Woman novel, in ways that challenged contemporary (late Victorian) critical discourses around fiction, genre, and gender.⁶

There was a significant shift in Adams' choices of genre (in poetry as well as fiction) after he moved from England to Australia and became a professional writer and journalist. The recurrent assumption of a tension between 'Art' and 'entertainment' or ephemera in his literary criticism may seem to be at odds with his changing literary practice, although I hope I

5 British Newspaper Archives searches from the 1880s show the terms realistic and sensational being used for many forms of entertainment – including panoramas, hippodromes, re-enactments of battles, through to the new and sensational cinema (1919).

6 Three of the five novels Adams wrote in Australia have been republished since: the bushranger novel, *John Webb's End*, by the specialist nineteenth-century Mulini Press (Canberra) in 1996; *A Child of the Age* by Garland (NY) in the Decadent Consciousness series in 1997; and *The Murder of Madeline Brown*, by Text Publishing (Melbourne) in 2000.

will be able to show otherwise. His criticism of 'popular' writers such as Walter Besant would be applied to his own work by critics and biographers who dismissed his more popular novels as 'pot-boilers' (Murray-Smith 14). However, all the mysteries, romances and bush tales Adams wrote offer at least some critique (explicit as well as implicit) of the social and political *status quo*, critique for him being a primary function of literature. His work provoked the castigation of conservative critics, and the praise of radical reviewers, in England and Australia for reasons other than literary style; a recurring lament of the critics was that such an able writer should waste his talents on such coarse (rather than trivial) material.

Adams' first novel *Leicester: An Autobiography*, was published in London in 1885, and his next, *Madeline Brown's Murderer*, in Melbourne in 1887. One is ostentatiously literary, the other avowedly popular, but both reflect Adams' interest in realism and in the uses of sensation, with a distinctly 'modern' touch. Each was marketed as contemporary, and both could be considered as part of the 'New Fiction' of the 1880s and 1890s, a label used to group works 'which seem to strike out in new directions and point toward that form of fiction we now call "modern" while maintaining many of the trappings of their mid-Victorian predecessors' (Mazzeno 424). *Leicester* was republished posthumously as *A Child of the Age* (1894), emphasising realism as a sign of its modernity.⁷

By contrast, *Madeline Brown's Murderer's* publishing tag 'realistic and sensational' explicitly associates it with the 'sensation fiction' that had been a marketing phenomenon and source of literary controversy since the 1860s. The term 'sensationalism' was still being used in Britain in the late 1880s and indeed would be employed to describe best-selling fiction into the early twentieth century. The other term in the phrase, 'realism', was similarly associated with the New Fiction, but had an even racier flavour, because of current controversies in both Britain and Australia over the work of Émile Zola. Zola's theory of realism would soon become known by the more specific term 'naturalism'.⁸ Adams nailed his colours firmly to the mast in his first novel and in his essay on 'Realism'. He defended realism, arguing for its progressiveness and modernity, and its necessity as an antidote to prurient, middle-class restrictions on nineteenth-century fiction in England.

7 Similarly, posthumously published essays were given the title *Essays in Modernity: Criticisms and Dialogues* (1899) by the same publisher, John Lane.

8 Zola's realism emphasised observation and analysis over imagination and moral precepts. W.S. Lilly wrote of naturalism in 1885: 'it claims to be scientific, and ... proposes as its object the study of the human animal – *la bête humaine* – subject to the action of its environment, the compulsion of heredity, the fatality of instinct ... it is strictly materialistic and frankly professes atheism' (280). For a more recent overview, see Brian Nelson, 'Émile Zola (1840–1902): Naturalism'. *Cambridge Companion to European Novelists*.

By associating *Madeline Brown's Murderer* with realism, Adams was in turn associating it with the more modern tendencies in European literature, even as the marketing label of 'sensational' evoked popular genres of fiction (and theatre) dating back to the middle of the century, albeit enjoying a new lease of life as detective fiction.

The New Fiction, including realistic, sensational, detective and other popular genres, could disturb Victorian British critics and reviewers by departing from mainstream values around gender and class. The ideological dubiousness of these novels was manifested through excesses of emotion, physical sensation and moral drama, felt to be inappropriate from the pens of middle-class authors, many of whom were women, and all of whom were presumed to be writing for women. As for less genteel readers, they were equally at peril, since, like women and children, the lower orders required instruction and guidance rather than over-stimulation from their leisure reading (see Pykett; Ledger; Brantlinger). As Patrick Brantlinger puts it, sensation novels

stripped the veils from Victorian respectability and prudery ... not by pushing the conventions of realistic fiction to its reified limits, as Zola was beginning to do in France, but by destabilizing those conventions, importing Gothic conventions back into contemporary settings, reinvesting the ordinary with mystery. (164)

And Lyn Pykett remarks that

Despite the success and greater *critical* visibility of male sensation writers such as Wilkie Collins and Charles Reade, sensation fiction was perceived mainly as a feminine phenomenon. Many, perhaps most, of the reviewers' objections to the genre, and their anxieties about it, derive from their perception of it as a form written by women, about women, and, on the whole, for women. (*'Improper' Feminine* 32 [my emphasis]).

In the Australian colonies, however, such conventional British gender assumptions could be modified or even negated by the anti-English sentiment of some writers and reviewers, not because of more enlightened ideas about gender but because they aligned an emerging nationalism with working-class masculinity. Attitudes to sensation fiction were similar to those around romance (see Giles; Sheridan). Susan Sheridan's analysis of the binary oppositions established by radical nationalist writers associated with the *Bulletin* in turn informs Robert Dixon's analysis of literary critical assumptions from the 1890s on, with 'Australian' writing being masculine and realistic, whereas other types of writing were dismissed as Anglo-centric and effeminate, if not actually feminine (Dixon 7). Such coding (with the feminine as conservative) differs from the British use of the term 'sensation' to signify the dangerous combination of the feminine and subversive. Both

types of ideologically determined gender coding are pertinent to, and are called into question by, a reading of Adams' work within and across these generic categories.

When Adams arrived in Australia, his literary career had just been launched with the publication of *Henry and Other Tales* (bound simply as *Poems*). Like much poetry in both Australia and Britain, this book was published at the author's expense. *Henry and Other Tales* was experimental in style, did not sell, and managed to offend the few who reviewed it, both in England in 1884 and when reissued in Brisbane (along with newer work) as *Poetical Works* in 1887. The reviewer for the *Brisbane Courier* regretted the use of 'sensational titles' and italics, as well as 'the forced alliteration, the compound adjectives, the weariness of all things under the sun, the affectation of mystery, the frequent intrusion of the grinning face of the satyr, all so dear to the cultured youth of our day' (Review). Intended to introduce Adams as a poet, the book at least helped him to establish his reputation as a literary *enfant terrible* – as did his debut novel.

Leicester: An Autobiography was published in 1885, in two volumes, at a price of 21 shillings by the idiosyncratic small press of George Redway, who had previously worked for Henry Vizetelly (Howsam 143). Adams had started the novel while living in Paris as an *attaché*, studying French and soaking up ideas about contemporary literature, theatre and art. The 'autobiography' of the title refers to the fictional narrator, Bertie Leicester, who gives an intensely impressionistic account of his life as a parentless child under the remote guardianship of a military man, as a boy at Glastonbury school, and as a young man in the slums of London and hotels of Paris. The plot revolves around his love for two women, a beautiful, idealised soul-mate of his own social class called Rayne, who marries an older man with a title and money, and a naïve, ignorant working-class girl called Rosie or Rosebud, who dies of tuberculosis. The young protagonist's disdain for social and sexual conventions is a dominant theme, and the novel is strikingly modern in its narrative mode.

The opening of *Leicester* reads as an experiment in impressionism, with fragments of sensory experience rather than a coherent narrative.

At some time in my earliest childhood I must, I think, have lived near a wind-mill: for I have, every now and then, ever since I can remember, seen one in the middle of a tender yellowy-golden band of sunset on a sandy elevation. Somewhere, perhaps below in the house in which I am, a canary, cageless, with upward-throbbing throat, sings.

And then I know a darker vision: a darker vision of a slanting planked floor, with an uncertain atmosphere therein, and a sound from thereout, as of a ship on the sea. A dim-rayed lamp oscillates in the middle. A woman is up in one of the berths, soothing and giving suck to a baby fractious with sleep

and misery. In the far corner is a huddled tartan-petticoated lump-round, with two protruding bare knees – a child unkempt, dirty, miserable, afraid of some heavy coming footstep. I know in some way that I am the child.

And then comes another vision, but lighter, and in a broader scene. (1)

As the protagonist grows up, the narrative settles into a more coherent structure and provides commentary on his feelings and thoughts. However, the present-tense narration is maintained throughout, an attempt to capture experience with minimal mediation. The emphasis of these passages is on sensation, rather than retrospective analysis or reflection.⁹

Self-consciously up-to-date, to the point of being modish, *Leicester* is the work of a new writer determined to signal a departure from the conventions of Victorian fiction. It was described by reviewers as 'morbid' and 'unhealthy', terms of disapproval commonly applied to both realistic and sensational literature at the time. The *Athenaeum* reviewer called it 'a nightmare of a book', adding that Adams would only affront readers and irritate critics with 'so wanton a misuse of his powers' ('Novels of the Week' 692). It was promptly banned by Mudie's, Smith's and the London Library (*Queenslander* 812), a *succès de scandale* which may have helped to secure it a place in John Lane's *avant-garde* Keynotes series a decade later. Re-issued with a cover and frontispiece designed by Aubrey Beardsley, it is distinctively a product of the *fin de siècle*.

In his 1888 essay 'Realism', published in the short-lived but important Sydney-based *Centennial Magazine*, Adams is keen to point out that *Leicester* had not been written to please readers who looked to novels for unchallenging entertainment. He begins by declaring his admiration for Charles Darwin while deploring the great man's preference for popular fiction, pointing out with some irony that the very qualities that would have made his first novel so unpalatable to 'the master', such as its unhappy ending and secular worldview, could be indirectly attributed to his absorption of Darwin's ideas and his pursuit of scientific or naturalistic aims in fiction ('Realism' 57). Adams wryly observes that his first excursions into authorship were not at all lucrative, despite reviewers' suggestions that he was 'catering to passions whose wages are not only sin and death but a satisfactory bank account' (58). In another essay that year, Adams writes, 'I have not the knack of knowing how to write rubbish that will always sell. So far I have had to do most of the *paying* as well ...' ('Contemporary Stage' 203). While suggesting that 'rubbish' might always

9 Pykett observes that in the late nineteenth century close attention to the sensory details of everyday life was regarded by conservative reviewers as a feminised mode of writing, particularly dangerous when associated with sensation fiction because it encouraged a focus on the physical and emotional, rather than the moral and intellectual (*Improper Feminine* 32). It was also a mode used by naturalist writers and early modernists to focus the reader's attention on sensory experience rather than narrative coherence or a recognisable social milieu.

find a more receptive market, Adams stops short of saying that *only* rubbish could sell well. This is significant, as all of his fiction after *Leicester* was written in more popular genres.¹⁰

Adams' essay appeared in August 1888, at the height of the outrage in London over the (supposedly) 'unexpurgated' translations of Émile Zola's novels into English by the publisher Edward Vizetelly, who was fined a hundred pounds and imprisoned for 'obscene libel' just as Adams' essay was going into print. However, unlike J.F. Archibald, who strongly championed Zola in the *Bulletin*,¹¹ Adams was luke-warm regarding only one of his novels, *Germinal* (1885), as a genuine work of art. He said that he regretted that Zola had annexed the term realism, 'because M. Zola is the head of a reaction, an extremist, and it is extremists who are for ever ruining good expressions' ('Realism' 58). Despite his guarded estimate Adams defended Zola and justified realism, by describing 'the more outrageous samples of his work' as reacting against 'a desperate prudery which has reduced novels to the lopsided moral partizancy of tenth-rate sermons' (58).

The critical goal of realism, according to Adams, is 'the resolution [...] to write no longer for half-views of things' but rather to 'extend the franchise' of fiction, as George Moore had advocated a few years earlier, beyond 'its usual constituency of young girls and widows of sedentary habits' (Moore, qtd in Pykett, *Improper Feminine* 38). It is because of this understanding of realism as a literary medium for progressive thinking and a weapon of class struggle, rather than as a particular generic form or method, that Adams, his publishers and reviewers were able to invoke it with regard to both *Leicester* and the sensation/detective novel, *Madeline Brown's Murderer*. These early novels, one aspiring to a condition of 'Art' and modernity, the other less ambitious in literary terms but offering social critique and evoking a sense of the modern, are both realistic, as understood in the critical terms of the day. Both feature the open or naturalistic representation of sexuality, death, the body, criminal behaviour, poverty and disease, and seek the reader's interest and sympathy

10 Adams had no reason to mention (and may not yet have known) that his second novel, *Madeline Brown's Murderer*, would be much more profitable. By 1893 it was said to have sold a very respectable 7,000 copies, reputedly earning him two pence a copy in royalties ('New Writers' 44). H.A. Kellow reports that 'Adams says he wrote *Madeline Brown's Murderer* (200 pages) in three days, that 10,000 copies were soon sold, and for it he obtained £40' (145). Three days sounds like rueful hyperbole on Adams' part, since his previous novel had taken three years to write, but is nonetheless suggestive.

11 Under J.F. Archibald's editorship in the 1880s, Zola's novels *L'Assomoir*, *Au Bonheur des Dames* and *Nana* 'were praised and defended, and the author was named in the *Bulletin* more often in those years than any Australian writer', not only on literary grounds but also as a rationalist, radical and writer for the working class (Lawson 177). Douglas Jarvis gives an account of Australian colonial controversies over Zola's work in 'Morality and Literary Realism: A Debate of the 1880s', and of Adams' role in this in 'Francis Adams: Australia's Champion of Realism'.

for characters outside the norms of conventional morality. One captures the memories or impressions of sensation in the service of realism; the other is associated with sensation as a more generic term denoting particular kinds of themes, plot, characterisation, setting and *milieux*.

A feature of both novels which aligns them with naturalism, sensation and the New Fiction of the 1880s and 1890s is their use of the city as setting for the darker aspects of social and psychological experience. Leicester's account of his time in London is a blend of realistic description and impressionism. Where the dreamy *pastiche* of childhood memories in the opening chapters creates an effect of distorted fragmentation, this later section of the novel reflects another psychological phenomenon of interest in the late nineteenth century: the heightened perceptions associated with fever and creativity. Leicester, almost penniless, has taken a cheap room in a poor street and is attempting to live by his pen. He adopts the stance of a strolling observer, in search of material. Imaginatively, he populates the dark heart of the great metropolis with shadowy inhabitants from the lowest strata of society, the desperate and degraded. In doing so, the novel offers social critique, but it may also be read as a projection from the narrator's subconscious:

[...] I found myself in dim streets, in which every now and then shadows as of women moved with a certain inspiration of fear. I passed close to some of them, drawn as by some latent power of fascination on the ground and in them, but not looking at their faces: till at last, passing somewhat quickly into an alley, I met one face to face under a protruding shadowed lamp. For a moment I stood breathless, with my eyes in the mad wolfishness and glitter of hers, and then, like a lightning flash that fills the whole air, terror of her filled me quite. ... the impression of that place, its shadowed air, its shadowed women, and the mad wolfishness and glitter of their eyes, was upon me all that night, turning my sleep into a nightmare. It was several days before that impression left me.

It was about this time that a vague idea came to me that I had caught some fever. [...] (73–74)

It transpires that Leicester's long-lost mother had become a prostitute (therefore not only 'fallen', in Victorian terms, but as good as dead to her son); she is one of those soliciting by gaslight. While his instinctive terror and flight are heightened by fever, they are also driven by deeper fears and taboos than he himself can apprehend.

Fever and creativity were frequently connected at the *fin de siècle*, particularly when associated with tuberculosis (the causes of which were still not fully understood). A.G. Stephens would say, with regard to Adams, that he was 'a man in phthisis [TB], which is a phase of genius' ('Australian Literature I' 83). Adams himself was interested in other consumptive artists such as Emily Brontë and John Keats, but in this novel, tuberculosis is

represented much less romantically. It is a disease of the poor, and specifically of Leicester's working-class lover, Rosie, who is not portrayed as any kind of genius. In depicting Rosie's death, *Leicester* uses another technique of naturalism, one that dwells on the body. Symptoms of disease and signs of death are described in terms that are nothing if not sensational. Leicester has been nursing Rosie:

The slow hours passed. I must have dozed. I awoke with a start. She was struggling violently. I saw that, and her swollen, livid face, and eyes strangely prominent with strange, clear brightness. Then I knew that she wanted me, and, in a moment, was across the bed, with one arm round her body and the other loosening her nightdress at the throat; but she had caught it, as it were, by chance, and rent it down wide open, just as the button was coming undone. I held her steadily up, despite her violent, downward struggles. She knew I was holding her. She could not get breath; she was suffocating. Her chest seemed rigid. I looked at her livid face again, her bright eyes, her stretched nostrils. (293)

The essay on realism in which Adams jokingly apologised for having written such an unhappy ending appeared a few months after his publication in 1887 of *Madeline Brown's Murderer*. This novel was clearly influenced by the success of Fergus Hume's *Mystery of a Hansom Cab*, and was published by the same small printer/publisher, Kemp & Boyce of Melbourne. Given the supercilious attitude to popular fiction expressed in his essays, the question is whether this move from experimental modernism to a sensational crime novel was a cynical abandonment of the ideals of art (in the service of progress) expounded in his essays, or an attempt to reach a larger market while maintaining those ideals. The evidence of Adams' own writing and the way in which his contemporaries reviewed *Madeline Brown's Murderer* suggest the latter. Combining a 'sensational' murder mystery with a 'realistic' portrayal of Melbourne society may well have allowed Adams to reach a popular market while also pursuing his literary goal of representing aspects of contemporary Melbourne social life critically.

Both Hume's *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* and *Madeline Brown's Murderer* are now 'obviously' murder mysteries, detective fiction.¹² In the 1880s, however, detective novels were still being labelled as sensation fiction. The cover of *The Mystery of the Hansom Cab* (1886) presents it as 'A Sensational Melbourne Novel', with the 1887 reprint adding 'a realistic story of Melbourne life' – the juxtaposition of sensation and realism being part of Kemp & Boyce's marketing strategy, echoing that of the notorious London publisher Vizetelly,

¹² They have been republished as such by Text, and both are discussed in *Continent of Mystery*, a history of Australian crime fiction, in which Stephen Knight observes that 'Crime fiction was not conceived of as a separate genre until the late nineteenth century, partly as a result of Conan Doyle's work: the earlier term "novel of sensation" was wider in its reference, including romantic melodramas' (18).

with his 'realistic' and 'sensational' translations of Zola. But when Adams later revised *Madeline Brown's Murderer* he replaced the subtitle 'a realistic and sensational novel' with 'a study of social life'.¹³ The change emphasises realism over sensation, however it is a shift of emphasis only. Although realism would for many become the antithesis of sensation in Australian literary discourse, at this particular time both literary modes represented threats to polite fictions about feelings and behaviour in English society.

Even in the 1860s, what had aroused the most interest and disgust among reviewers of *The Woman in White*, *East Lynne* and *Lady Audley's Secret* (the traditional triad of 1860–1862, reviews of which generated the label 'sensation literature'),¹⁴ was their quasi-realism, their skill in 'domesticating the romantic and exotic and normalizing the exceptional' (Edwards 9). These trends were connected to the rise of mass literacy, and to the changes in newspapers read by the middle and upper classes which were collectively referred to by outraged conservatives (following Matthew Arnold) as the New Journalism. The New Journalism was seen by many as cheap, sensational, American, market-driven – and to have much in common with sensation fiction (Pykett, *Improper' Feminine* 54, 199).

A distinctive feature of sensation fiction in the late nineteenth century was its use of newspaper reports and advertising as an up-to-date, secular rather than supernatural, means of creating and communicating sensation (Martin and Mirmohamadi 23). Like *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab*, *Madeline Brown's Murderer* incorporates news reporting of the murder, but to slightly different effect. Where Hume's placement of a fictional murder report from the *Argus* at the beginning of his novel was documentary collage, a presentation of 'facts' comparable to the *faux* documentary method used by Wilkie Collins in *The Woman in White*, Adams takes us much more intimately into the workings of the newspaper itself.

The novel's protagonist and amateur detective, David Stuart, who works for the *Melbourne Age*, is well aware of his power as a journalist in an era of mass communication. The novel goes into some detail about how accurately Stuart reports the murder and also how he sets out to persuade readers to share 'his relentless hunger and thirst for vengeance':

The paper for which he wrote had the largest circulation in the colony, and he knew that the usual 60,000 or so of its readers would in this case be largely increased. Into every one of these he calculated on injecting some of the dry, burning resolution of watchfulness and dogged pursuit which was consuming

13 Authorial revisions were made to an existing copy of the first edition, which is held in the Mitchell Library. Neither Adams's new title nor his textual revisions were used in Text's edition of 2000.

14 Notably, 'Sensation Literature' (*Literary Budget* Nov. 1861: 15) which grouped these three novels together.

him. He knew only too well how evanescent all public feeling is, but he knew, also, to what a pitch of intensity it can be worked for a short period, and for the first time exulted in his power as a provider of the fuel that can raise the fire to the heat of the furnace. (39–40)

This is an up-to-date late 1880s version of the sensation novel. There is a knowingness about the use of modern media to create a sensation in the newspaper-reading public which alludes to the novel's genre, creating enough of an ironic gap to flatter the alert reader.

Nonetheless, *Madeline Brown's Murderer* does not hold back from offering sensation and spectacle to its own readers, particularly in the opening pages of the novel. These present a dramatic scene which serves as a prelude to the narrative proper: an opulently furnished bedroom and heavily curtained bed (described as a 'veritable love nest') upon which is arranged the body of a beautiful woman barely covered by a tightly wrapped diaphanous nightdress. She is gagged and drugged, tied to the bed posts, watching her own blood dripping slowly from a wound in her arm into an open basin. Watching her from a darkened doorway is her murderer, a shadowy male figure whose identity remains unknown until the novel's finale. The victim, Madeline Brown, is an international woman of mystery who has taken Melbourne by storm, first by means of her extraordinary beauty and charm, then by her talent on the stage as a heroine of light opera. This opening tableau (characterised by eerie stillness rather than dramatic action) is indeed realistic and sensational, as promised, with the visual spectacle underscored by the heavy scent of laudanum and by the sound of a piano in a nearby room playing over and over again the monotonous rhythmic beat of a waltz from Madeline's last stage performance. Making the novel's central female figure an actress was a stroke of genius on Adams' part, as it allowed for this and other sensational spectacles and events to be theatrically staged within an otherwise realistic narrative. This ironic framing breaks down, however, as the focus of the text moves to the investigation of the crime and pursuit of justice, with the climactic duel between Stuart and the murderer taking place on a deserted beach, with no audience other than its readers.

The novel presents an array of characters drawn from melodrama but also from contemporary life – the Creole heroine with her flamboyantly sensual nature, her coldly rational but murderously vengeful American husband, and the stock figure of Canon Hildyard, a repressed English clergyman who is (somewhat improbably) Madeline's secret lover. Hildyard becomes one of the chief suspects (and a second murder victim) because of his tortured sexual obsession and jealousy. The protagonist, David Stuart, while being drawn from emerging conventions of detective fiction (he is an amateur investigator, for instance, with the usual disdain for the police), is also clearly a part of Adams' ongoing project of delineating distinctively

Australian character types. He is motivated by a remarkably chaste love for Madeline; he is also an Australian patriot, and as a working journalist is able to move between social classes with relative ease. Drawing on new, popular genres such as detective fiction or the colonial love triangle, Adams produces a hybrid of the commercially successful formulae of realistic and sensational fiction (à la *Hansom Cab*) and the fiction of democracy and social realism he advocated as the way forward for Australian literature.

The murder victim, Madeline Brown, is an extraordinary character, who seems intended to present a free-thinking challenge to conventional morality, while also (inevitably) suffering the consequences. While it would be difficult to accommodate the characters and the murder itself within anything but a sensational melodrama, Adams makes the sexual transgressiveness of his dead heroine a matter for debate, rather than simply the cause of her death. Although her superlative beauty and talent as an actress are used to set her above conventional morality, it is revealed that Madeline had been killed by her estranged husband as punishment for a series of infidelities, with the additional motive that he intends to marry her maid. Her past, which according to him included periods of voluntarily working in brothels, is unknown to Melbourne society. Her frank sensuousness and active sexuality are handled discreetly in her performance of the 'role' of society lady, finding expression through her stage performances, and her electrifying effect on audiences, as well as on the men who gather around her wherever she goes. What is worth noting about all this is that it does not diminish the admiration or esteem she is held in by Stuart; rather, the murderous husband is condemned for his treachery and persecution of his estranged wife. In an exchange before the two men arrange to duel, Stuart asks:

'Why did you kill her?'

'She was my wife. She was not true to me.'

'Were you faithful to her?'

'I was not, but that was her fault.'

'What right had you to kill her, then?'

'The right that I did it!'

'You are a devil!'... 'You dogged her all over the world – from America to Europe, from Europe to here. She wished her freedom. Why could you not give it to her? What right had you to do this?' (142–43)

The *Sydney Morning Herald* found the character of Madeline, and the lack of condemnation by Stuart, unsavoury: 'there is an immoral glare about the book, which will hardly recommend it to any but the sensuous and sensational-minded' (Review 6).

This attack provoked a response in the *Bulletin*, a diatribe on the subject of realism written by Adams' close friend and colleague Fred Broomfield, who worked as a sub-editor on the *Bulletin* and was one of the founding

editors of the *Centennial Magazine*.¹⁵ Broomfield worked closely with Adams, helping with the publication in the same year of his *Songs of the Army of the Night*. In his review, he defends the heroine/victim, implying that only the prurient would brand her immoral:

To the superficial Philistine, Madeline Brown, the heroine, is an immoral, albeit beautiful, sorceress; to the student of character, she is the pure, unsullied child of Nature, ignorant alike of virtue and vice, who blooms and expands like some rich exotic of her own Southern land, indifferent to society's opinions or the cut and dried logic of systems of theology. ([Broomfield] 9)

Such readers are provided with avatars in the novel in Canon Hildyard or the murdering husband, Raynor Brown.

Broomfield makes the same claim for *Madeline Brown's Murderer* that Adams had made for realistic fiction generally (and, implicitly, for his own first novel) in his essay on 'Realism', focusing on the 'masculine' mode of realism, portraying society and human nature scientifically and without censorship, rather than the more feminised sensation. Both invoke radical European ideas as an antidote to the stultifying effects of the English class system:

Realistic it is [...] but, somehow, critics of English nationality always think of one sort of realism, and only one sort – the realism of nastiness. Zola discovered that dunghills were profitable investments. He consents to keep his nose over a cesspool for so much a sniff. Adams, on the other hand, is only realistic as an artist would be who painted the nude figure. ([Broomfield] 9)

To Adams and his contemporaries, realism was associated with both social and political progressiveness. Whatever the genre, it entailed the creation of sensations and representation of 'extremes' that were excluded from more genteel fiction. Adams combined elements of realism and sensation in many of his novels – not only *Leicester* and *Madeline Brown*, but also a bushranger novel featuring a lesbian relationship (*John Webb's End*), a 'novel of manners' (or romance) (*The Melbourneians*), and finally, what would now be called a New Woman novel about problems of marriage (*Lady Lovan*), which Adams described simply as a 'novel of English social life' ('New Writers' 44). They are set in Britain and Australia, are ranged along the spectrum from literary to popular, and many of the characters reappear throughout Adams' work.¹⁶

15 Adams later wrote to Broomfield about reviewing *Songs of the Army of the Night* for the *Bulletin*: 'Yours is the sole real criticism I shall get, and will be valuable and valued accordingly. p.s. put at the bottom of your notice the place of publication and the price. You didn't do that with "Maddy"' (Morris Miller Papers MS87/2/1).

16 A 'Note' at the end of *Madeline Brown's Murderer* reads: 'Many characters are common to both the Fictional and Poetical Work of the Author, and this is the case with several in this tale. For Randal, Hawkesbury, Mrs. Brown (together with her husband and Charles Anderson), see in the Author's *Poetical Works* under "Edward," "Frank," and

They belong to a 'cycle' Adams had planned well before leaving England, inspired by *La Comédie Humaine*:

"A Child of the Age," [*Leicester*] is the first of a series of novels and tales. Oh, I was going to do as big as Balzac that way!¹⁷ Fancy what a pretty scheme for a jackanapes of eighteen, and to have sweated at it all these years! [...] There are three novels to do yet, and about eight short tales.' He also intended to work through the same cycle of characters in his Verse. [Editor's note, title page, *A Child of the Age*]

The rigorously scientific analysis emphasised by naturalism and used in *Leicester* gave way to less obtrusively experimental narrative techniques as Adams went on to write in different genres. The emphasis on sensation, while remaining strong, becomes less impressionistic, less a matter of modernist experimentation and more descriptive, used in ways that would be classed as more conventionally or generically 'sensational' in order to heighten the representation of character and plot (as in the description of Madeline's body in that novel's opening tableau).

Madeline Brown's Murderer thus marks a change of address in Adams' work from 'literary' to 'popular', one that has led to most of his subsequent novels being neglected as 'mostly pot boilers' (Murray-Smith 14) or simply not discussed (Turnbull). But the gulf between his two early novels is largely a product of twentieth-century literary criticism and history, compounding the off-hand way Adams and his contemporaries disparaged work written for money or a more general audience. It is possible that Adams felt freer in Australia to 'compromise' the literary status he had aspired to in Britain by writing in more popular modes (in order to live), and that this was part of a democratic Anglophone culture he hoped to see develop in the antipodes.

Francis Adams is a distinctive figure in Australian literature, partly because he is difficult to accommodate within the gender and genre hierarchies of later nineteenth-century literary criticism. His essay on Realism and reflections on *Leicester* make claims for realism as an innovative mode of modernity, aiming for a form of Art uncompromised by conventional mores. His subsequent intervention in the critical discussion of *Madeline Brown's Murderer* reflects his insistence upon pursuing serious political and aesthetic ideals while working in the popular sensation genre, invoking the more intellectually respectable (because masculine) albeit radical French mode of realism. The tangle of generic elements in Adams' fiction reflects a range of cultural, political, marketing and canon-building forces at work

"Madeline," respectively. For "Maddock," see the Author's *Australian Essays*, the Dialogue "Dawnwards".

17 Balzac's *La Comédie Humaine* is a set of at least ninety interlinked novels, short stories and analytical essays with recurring characters and thematic groupings, portraying aspects of French life, published mid-century but only fully translated into English by the 1890s.

in literary publication and reception in late nineteenth-century Australia. Adams' novels explicitly challenge assumptions about gender and class: those which dominated Victorian discussions of realism and sensation, and those informing twentieth-century oppositions between realism and romance. In doing so, work by Francis Adams not only reminds us of an almost forgotten episode in the history of 'realism' in Australian literature, it also exemplifies and challenges gendered concepts of genre in the late nineteenth century.

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