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REVIEW: Mary E. Gillham, *Island Hopping in Tasmania's Roaring Forties*
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C A CRANSTON looks at Mary E Gillham's fine new work of nature writing

DARWIN'S ATROPHIED BRAIN

Charles Darwin was in his thirties when he discovered he could no longer endure to read a line of poetry and that Shakespeare's work nauseated him. He attributed this to atrophy of the brain, though he found he could still cope with the lesser demands of the novel (so long as the ending was happy). He appears to have escaped criticism for his comments, perhaps because his theory of evolution provided sufficient entertainment for the Victorian novelist. Darwin's literary laundry is aired because cerebral shrinking might explain my own 'fiction-fatigue', although the genre stimulates a different physical response: an ache in my gut as it hungers for an extratextual reality that is not anthropocentric; that is not a slick-take on the latest theory; that grounds the metaphor. In short, a hungering for the Ur-text.

Thank god for the Naturalists. Naturalists (and many have visited the Archipelago State, including Darwin) exhibit an immediate at-home-ness and intimacy with their subject no matter where they are. The writing arises from an intense curiosity about the world around them rather than writing about themselves in the world. There's no room in Rome, or a room of one's own: these are the *plein air* authors who set about Latinising, vulgarising, and sketching *biota*. Mary Gillham's *Island Hopping in Tasmania's Roaring*

Forties (which is not a novel) is part of a 'new' kind of literature, which includes Gilbert White's *The Natural History of Selbourne* (1788), the fourth most published book in the English language. Gillham's work is an ecological and social history primarily of the islands and reefs that make up the Furneaux Group. The book's genre, or taxonomy, is 'nature writing' — an informed observation of flora and fauna (data) written in a literary mode.

Gillham, the author of a dozen books, is not

a ‘literary’ writer; she is an island ecologist. This book traces her time based on Fisher Island during the fifties and sixties, when she was living in a hut named ‘Yolla’ (Palawa for ‘mutton bird’). Each of the twenty-one chapters contains three separate essays, themselves regional microcosms of human and environmental history. Gillham’s island hopping’ (or more accurately, ‘island hoping’, since science must bend to the vagaries of the Roaring Forties, human kindness, and the sea-worthiness of boats) provides the narrative link. Her subject matter includes assessing the viability of the muttonbird (shearwater) industry and its impact on other industries (mutton bird oil greased the timber skids at sawmills, as well as being the ‘suntan oil from the royal bird of Tahiti’). But muttonfish (abalone), cattle, feral pigs, boobiallas, boxthorns (its noxious presence embedded in its Latin name, *Lycium ferrocissimum*) and other members of a friendly and alien biotic community are recorded by the loving eye of the naturalist, not the economist. The ecologist probes the lives of characters, drawn from a pool of species-diversity and behavioural-singularity, such the short-tailed shearwater, who lays eggs between the 20 November and 2 December, while the males experience concurrent collapse of the testes.

Other species, while less predictable or dramatic, punctuate Gillham’s solitude during their island migrations: Trooper Lew Bailey (observed during a ‘rash moment of activity’), Leila Barrett, harbour mistress during the war (celebrated in a poem by Andrew Sant), the Mansells, the Maynards, Max McGarvie. There is no attempt to justify their part in a plot or to linger over motivations; their presence is accorded a treatment similar to that given Dorothy by her nature poet brother, in ‘Tintern Abbey’— the existence of other human beings in the text creates unstartled surprise. Insouciance and the artist continue with Russell Drysdale’s encounter with a snake. Out bagging specimens with Eric Worrell (antivenin developer), Dom Serventy (zoologist), and the author, ‘Tas’ Drysdale (simultaneously collecting less-tangible material for *Journey Among Men* (1962)) confronts his subject, a black snake, already named for Serventy. Science and art collaborate to create a textual memorial as the Fisher Island white-lipped whip snake now bears the artist’s signature, *Drysdalia coronoides*.

Gillham observes that Drysdale’s snake, along with the Chappell Island tiger snakes, has evolved differently due to isolation, but she does not attempt to transform them into emblems of isolation (that has been Donne to death). She witnesses snakes devouring their young, and

[Photography: *Rock, Furneux Group* by Grant Dixon omitted from digital versions]

snakes sloughing their skins, the opening being at the mouth where the snake has crawled out. The word ‘ouroboros’ remains unarticulated but deliciously extra-textual. Here breathing representatives of Darwinism practice challenging alternatives as a penguin prepares to mate with the author’s shiny gumboot. Had there been viable issue, the outcome might have been different for the 45,000 penguins that Gillham estimates were affected by the *Iron Baron* spill in 1995. Unnatural selection turns ugly and anthropocentric as penguins, dolphins, muttonbirds, gannets, and cormorants are transformed into the more profitable cray bait, while local guardians of the law tip poachers the wink ‘if independent inspections were impending’. Eager to gain knowledge about skull sizes, scientists administer a lethal dose of chloroform to four young possums; a five year-old girl tears legs off muttonbirds in preparation for packaging; and a ‘lighthouse boy’ slits the throat of a sheep on Maatsuyker Island.

Gillham enlists the ‘Ancient Mariner’ as a parable for the Cat Island gannets. These gannets provided Bass with a fleeting meal in 1799, and numbered more than 2,500 nesting pairs a century later; but by the mid-1950s the count was eighteen nesting pairs. Retribution rests, she concludes, with the loss of potential tourist dollars for what was once the largest gannetry in Australia. Backward-glancing enlightened rage is, of course, senseless: today’s habits help cook the golden goose that the nineteenth-century settlers developed a taste for: a 0.5 degree Celsius rise in sea temperature is believed responsible for the disappearance of ninety percent of the world’s sooty shearwaters. Skinner’s Graveyard

on King Island is a nineteenth-century charnel midden composed of thousands of seal and sea elephant skeletons. (Sea elephants were placed on the endangered species list, this year).

Gillham's research, gathered in the middle of last century, and updated with material from a trip back to the islands in the eighties and nineties, provides a regional ecological barometer and history of species interaction. Her observation of the biota is acute (her Furneaux Group research includes finding fifty-three new species of plant on Deal Island) and where science guides labeling, Gillham is thorough. Less acceptable are the references to the 'half-castes', and to a 1950s portrayal of Cape Barren Aboriginals which remains unexamined during her later trip. She is simply better with non-human species.

She recalls her reunion forty years later with Derek Smith, a hunter turned conservationist, as they stand outside his home, botanising a species of tree covered with old tea bags. *Coprosma teabageri*? she suggests. It's to Derek's memory and to other naturalists who have worked on the Bass Strait islands that sculptor Stephen Walker is currently casting a bronze of Cape Barren Geese, on Flinders Island. And while the sculpture will speak for those who are gone, it seems appropriate to continue the work of the naturalists who speak for those who cannot. It is the naturalist who writes the 'oral history' of the bioregions and I wonder if The Tasmanian Government Historical Publications Fund of \$20,000 recently announced by Education Minister Paula Wriedt shouldn't also be aimed at the verbally and vertically-challenged, living representatives of Tasmania's heritage and history — such as the sea elephants and fur seals — the keepers of the Ur-text of settlement and exploration. It might be a small move towards a 'happy ending'.

Footnote: Gillham sailed with the ANARE (The Australian and New Zealand Antarctic Research Expeditions), one of the first four women to join an Antarctic expedition (see *Sub-Antarctic Sanctuary: Summertime on Macquarie Island* (1967)). Her natural history writing can be found in the Royal Society of Tasmania's papers, and anyone caring to compare the two forms (natural history writing and nature writing) can read Gillham's paper 'Breeding Habits of the White-Faced Storm Petrel (*Pelagodroma marina*) in Easter Bass strait' (1963) alongside 'White-Faced Storm Petrel Colonies: Three Spences Reefs, Rabbit and Penguin Islands and Isabella Reef', in Chapter 13.

C A Cranston recently published a narrative anthology, *Along These Lines: From Trowenna to Tasmania* (Cornford Press, 2000), teaches Australian and English literature at the University of Tasmania and is currently serving on the Arts' Development Panel of Arts Tasmania.