

# The 'strangely curious career' of *Philiberta*: a 'lost' New Zealand novel

Lawrence Jones

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The section on the novel in *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English* is aimed at being as comprehensive as possible. The ambition was to include all full-length fiction before 1890 and all 'serious' novels since then. It is, of course, an impossible aim, complicated by boundary problems (what is a 'serious' novel?) and by the lack of a fully inclusive bibliography (James Burns' *New Zealand Novels and Novelists 1861-1979* does not even include all the New Zealand novels in the Turnbull and Hocken collections, and A.G. Bagnall's *New Zealand National Bibliography to the Year 1960*, although more complete, still omits some novels). A further complication, acknowledged in the Second Edition of the *Oxford History* (121), is the lack of any index of novels serialised in newspapers and magazines, many of which did not appear in book form (or appeared only in paperback editions which have totally disappeared). There are thus undoubtedly many New Zealand novels, especially nineteenth-century ones, that are not discussed in the *Oxford History*. This note examines one of these that has recently come to light (in George Griffiths' entry on the author in *Southern People: A Dictionary of Otago and Southland Biography*), Thorpe Talbot's *Philiberta: A Novel*, a copy of which is held in the Hocken Library.

Talbot appears only briefly in the *Oxford History*, in a one-sentence description of her novella, *Blue Cap* (1991: 112-13; 1998: 124-25), which appeared in 1881 along with Vincent Pyke's *White Hood: A Tale of the Terraces* in a Christmas volume, *White Hood and Blue Cap: A Christmas Bough with Two Branches*. The story is a strange (not to say absurd) Gothic tragic melodrama in which Marion, the heroine, believing Gower, the man she loves, is engaged to someone else, marries the strange Linfield, then repents when she discovers she was misinformed concerning Gower's engagement, attempts to leave the marriage, is imprisoned by Linfield, and is killed trying to escape. The Gothic element is in the

character of Linfield, a South Otago run-holder who is deformed by a hump and horns (which he hides by always wearing a blue cap), caused by his mother having seen his father killed by a bull while she was pregnant with him.

Griffiths' entry on Talbot casts some light on her career and identity. Based on a cache of clippings and notes that may have been Talbot's own and which were found in a house in Dunedin and obtained by Griffiths c. 1992, that entry shows her to have been Frances Ellen Talbot, born in 1851 in Yorkshire, probably brought up in Victoria, and resident at least some of the time in New Zealand from probably the late 1870s. In 1882 she published a guide to the Rotorua district, the title page of which identifies her as the author not only of *Blue Cap* and *Philiberta* but also of *Guinevere*, of which there is no other record. *Philiberta* was published by Ward Lock in London in 1883, but the Australian edition, from E.W. Cole Book Arcade in Melbourne, is undated and may have appeared in 1882 (since it is mentioned on the title page of the 1882 guide) and is identified on the cover as 'The *Melbourne Leader* £100 Prize Tale'. Talbot may have been a professional journalist in these years, although the evidence is not clear. In 1887 she published in the *Otago Witness* a series of travel accounts about a visit to California, and there are also a few clippings of her poems and articles, with source and date unidentified, among the cache of papers. Morris Miller in his book on Australian literature lists her as 'contributor of short stories and poems to "annuals" and miscellanies' (II: 627). In her private life in these years, Talbot was said to have been the mistress of Judge Charles Dudley Ward, a District Judge in Dunedin, Oamaru and other South Island districts. At any rate, she married Ward in 1902 when she was 51 and he 74, six years after his wife's death in 1896. Ward died in Dunedin in 1912 while Talbot lived on in Dunedin in straitened circumstances until her death in 1923.

*Philiberta* is subtitled on the cover (but not on the title page) *An Australian Tale*, is listed by Miller as an Australian novel (II: 627) and is not listed in Burns or Bagnall. However, as Miller notes, the novel also relates to New Zealand. It opens and closes in Victoria, but much of the middle part takes place in Dunedin and later in Canterbury, Otago and Southland during a musical tour, both sections revealing considerable local knowledge. The book is a strange mixture of modes and genres. It is primarily a *bildungsroman*, somewhat anticipating Edith Grossmann's Hermione novels, *In Revolt* (1893) and *The Knight of the Holy Ghost*

(1907), in tracing the life of the heroine, Philiberta Campbell, from her girlhood to her death, showing the development of a strongly independent personality that never finds a fulfilling role in life. As in Grossmann, the *bildungsroman* is crossed with tragic melodrama, but with rather more elements of the romance and the sensation novel and with less didactic intent. (Although there is plenty of material in Philiberta's life that would bear a feminist interpretation, there is little of Grossmann's overt feminism in Philiberta herself or in the omniscient commentary.) The novel is full of sensational events: the death of Philiberta's mother during a bush fire, the violent death of her adoptive parents at the hands of Aborigines angry because their workers had poisoned members of the Aborigine group who were stealing food from the sheep station kitchen, Philiberta's poisoning and near death in the Australian outback, her near-drowning in a shipwreck off the Otago Heads, her eventual death alone in the Australian desert. Much of the sensational action concerns her doomed romance with Edgar Paget, perhaps a dramatised projection of Talbot's own relationship with Judge Ward. On a visit to Dunedin, Philiberta meets Paget, an older man also visiting from Australia, and falls in love with him, but on the eve of their planned marriage she discovers by accident, in good sensation novel fashion, that he is already married. Fleeing from Dunedin, she is caught up in the shipwreck, is assumed to be drowned, but is picked up by another ship, carried around the South Pacific, and finally returns to Australia where she has a series of adventures furthering her 'strangely curious career' (203). These adventures include her anonymously giving her money to save Paget from bankruptcy, and her establishing herself as a singer and actress and travelling with a theatrical troupe through the outback (where she nearly dies), before she settles for several years disguised as a man working on a sheep station. After another interval in New Zealand with a travelling musical troupe (in which she is a 'male' violinist), she returns to Australia, and, still disguised as a man, enters the employ of Paget where, unrecognised by him, she helps to care for his alcoholic wife (with echoes of *Jane Eyre* as well as the Shakespearian romance tradition)—'the strangest experience in that wholly strange life' (300). When Paget's wife finally commits suicide, the reader may expect the usual *mort vivant* of the sensation novel, with Philiberta revealing herself to Paget, returning from the dead to claim him (as his employee-confidante she had often heard him declaiming his love for the 'dead' Philiberta). Instead, she discovers he has now fallen in love with her

actress friend (who is herself in love with Philiberta's earliest suitor), and she takes herself off to the desert to die alone. Less than 400 pages long, the novel has enough sensation, romance, and melodrama to fill several three-deckers.

Yet the capacious, almost picaresque narrative also contains relatively unassimilated elements of naive realism and social observation. The Dunedin chapters have lengthy descriptions of Talbot's favourite places, even including a chunk of Thomas Bracken's poem on Nicholls Creek, and a semi-satirical presentation of a circle of Dunedin free-thinkers, the Free Thought Society, which reads as if it were pointing towards actual persons (the Society existed at the time and had among its members Sir Robert Stout and Vincent Pyke) and which includes as Philiberta's friend and good hostess a Mrs Retlaw, whose name could possibly be the mirror-version of a real Mrs Walter. The middle Melbourne sequence has an eighteenth-century-style inset story about Philiberta's actress friend and how her life has embittered her against men and respectable society, while the second South Island sequence has a long first-person account by a minor member of the travelling musical troupe that includes somewhat ironic tour-guide descriptions of Kaiapoi, Oamaru, Naseby, St Bathans, and other places, even referring us to Vincent Pyke's description of Dunstan (Cromwell) Gorge in *Wild Will Enderby* (Pyke 1873, 16), and also including an account of Judge Ward's heroic actions in a fire in Timaru in 1878.

As in *Blue Cap*, the extreme shifts in tone and subject matter are to some extent covered over by a loquacious omniscient narrator who moves easily from irony and satire to highly rhetorical dramatic descriptions and expressions of emotion, and who overtly expresses opinions about such matters as Australian racism, fundamentalist religion, and smug New Zealand rationalism. As much as the work of George Chamier, Talbot's novel shows how the colonial version of the Victorian popular novel could be a kind of gladstone bag containing everything from the odds and ends of journalism to the standard devices of melodrama. No undiscovered masterpiece, *Philiberta* is nonetheless an interesting document in New Zealand literary and social history.

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