

Lady Barker, 1831?–1911

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A colonial rather than a New Zealand writer, Lady Barker nevertheless occupies a distinct place in nineteenth-century New Zealand literature, thanks to her lively account of station life in the pioneering period, *Station Life in New Zealand*.

Lady Barker was born Mary Anne Stewart in Jamaica, where her father was a colonial official. During her infancy and young adulthood she travelled to England several times, where, as she records in an autobiographical chapter in *Colonial Memories*, 'an old gypsy woman' told her fortune, predicting that she would 'never be rich' and that she would 'wander up and down the earth.' Both predictions came true. Lady Barker never became wealthy, but she travelled all over the British Empire, leaving fresh, readable accounts of her life in places as far apart as New Zealand and Trinidad, Western Australia and Natal.

In 1852 Lady Barker married George Barker, a soldier with whom she had two sons. The marriage appears to have been a happy one, but was marred by separation, as Barker had to leave England to serve with the British Army in Russia and India. (He was knighted in 1859 for his services during the Mutiny). At the end of 1860 Lady Barker joined her husband in India. Her stay was a short one, as Barker died there the next year. Lady Barker returned to England a widow, where she lived quietly with her family.

This peaceful, conventional English existence came to an end in 1865, when Lady Barker married a young New Zealand sheepfarmer, Frederick Napier Broome. She took what she was later to describe as 'the wild and really almost wicked step' of leaving her children in England and going with Broome to New Zealand, where Broome planned to buy a sheep station. After a long, stormy voyage, the pair arrived in Lyttelton in October 1865 and made the trek over the Port Hills to the new city of Christchurch. There Lady Barker noted the 'very practical style and tone' of life and the 'independence in bearing' of the people, especially of servants (this last was a theme to which Lady Barker, who had a very English sense of class, returned more than once). It was in Christchurch, too, where the couple stayed for several months, that Lady Barker gave birth to her third son, who did not live long.

In 1866 the couple moved to the sheep station, Steventon, in the foothills of the Southern Alps, that Broome had bought with a partner. The station house was called Broomielaw, and it was from Broomielaw that Lady Barker wrote most of the letters that later formed the basis of *Station Life in New Zealand*.

In 1868, after a severe snow storm had destroyed nearly half their flock, Lady Barker and her husband left New Zealand and returned to England 'with sadly diminished means.' Back in London and needing an income, they decided to turn their hands to literature. Broome, who had some poetic talent, wrote verse and worked as a newspaper correspondent. Lady Barker, at the urging of Alexander Macmillan of the London publishing firm of that name, turned her letters from New Zealand into the book she is best remembered for.

Station Life in New Zealand, which Lady Barker described as 'the exact account of a lady's experience of the brighter and less practical side of colonization', is a vivid narrative of life in Christchurch and the South Island high country at a time when the remoter parts of New Zealand were still being opened up for European settlement. The book concentrates, generally, on the lighter side of pioneering. In 'Society – Houses and Servants' Lady Barker describes a ball she goes to in Christchurch; in 'Housekeeping and Other Matters' she talks about her attempts at cooking (the results were 'curious and nasty'). In 'A Christmas Picnic and Other Doings' she tells her readers about a summer ride to a neighbouring station and the magnificent vistas of mountain, bush and plain she passed on the way, while in 'My First and Last Experience of Camping Out' she recalls the discomfort she, Broome and some friends experienced when they spent the night on the summit of a nearby hill. The tone throughout is self-deprecating and comic; Lady Barker, though always a 'lady', is not afraid to laugh at herself, especially when her middle-class English expectations meet the reality of colonial New Zealand. Favourite themes are the beauty of the hill-country landscapes and the perfection of New Zealand mornings ('the air is so light and yet balmy, it seems to heal the lungs as you inhale it').

Light as the subject matter generally is, there are moments when a darker, more painful reality intrudes. In 'Death in Our New Home', Lady Barker tells of the death of her new-born son, and describes the anguish felt by herself and Frederick. In 'The New Zealand Snow Storm of 1867', she gives a detailed account of the freezing tempest that engulfed Steventon that year. The snow was so deep that Lady Barker and her housemates could barely get out of the station house, and they were so hungry they feared they were going to die of starvation. Trying as such experiences must have been, Lady Barker always maintains her cheerfulness. It is this uncomplicated joie de vivre that made *Station Life in New Zealand* such a popular book, and it was reprinted many times and translated into French and German.

Encouraged, perhaps, by the positive reaction to *Station Life in New Zealand*, Lady Barker published ten more books between 1870 and 1875. Several of these books made use of Lady Barker's experiences at Steventon,

presenting new New Zealand material or reworking incidents and events which had already appeared in *Station Life in New Zealand*. In *A Christmas Cake in Four Quarters* (1871), a hot Christmas Day in New Zealand is evoked after parallel descriptions of Christmas Day in other parts of the British Empire. In *Stories About* - , a collection of tales about diverse subjects which was also published in 1871, 'The Grave by the Rakaia' tells of the lonely death of a high country traveler. In *Travelling About Over New and Old Ground* (1872), a survey of recent exploration in the Americas, Africa, Asia and Australasia, Lady Barker devotes three chapters to New Zealand, telling her readers about the country 'as it was', moving on to New Zealand 'as it is', and finally giving a pen portrait of the history, population and economy of 'the Middle Island' (the South Island). In *Boys* (1874), a collection of tales about 'boy friends' Lady Barker had known, or claimed to have known, one story, 'Louis Roden, My Emigrant Boy' describes the adventures of a young Englishman who goes out to make a new life for himself in New Zealand. Louis, who functions as a kind of male alter ego for Lady Barker, has many of the experiences Lady Barker had while at Steventon (he 'burns the run' for instance, and hunts wild cattle). It is an efficient recycling of familiar New Zealand material.

More considerable than any of these books was *Station Amusements in New Zealand*, which Lady Barker published in 1873. Clearly written to capitalize on the success of *Station Life in New Zealand*, it focuses, as the title implies, on the 'idler hours' of pioneering life. Lady Barker tells her reader about bush picnics and eel-fishing ('a monotonous pursuit'); she discusses tobogganing in winter, 'swaggers' (tramps) and the many pets she had at Broomielaw (Lady Barker was very fond of animals). *Station Amusements in New Zealand* often reworks or expands upon material from *Station Life in New Zealand*, and its tone is similarly engaging. It lacks the latter's immediacy and liveliness, however. This is partly due to the fact that it is not based on real letters, unlike the earlier book, and partly because Lady Barker tends to moralize in a somewhat sententious manner. In 'A Bush Picnic,' for example, she praises loggers for their hard work ('sobriety and industry are the first essentials of success') and lectures the reader on the folly of sending out to the colonies young gentlemen with no capital and no practical skills.

In 1875 Lady Barker followed her husband to Natal in South Africa, where Broome was working as Colonial Secretary to the Governor. Subsequently she accompanied Broome to Mauritius, Western Australia (where Broome was Governor, and had a town named after him), and to Trinidad, where Broome was again Governor. Lady Barker appears to have enjoyed her life in these places (she became especially fond of Western Australia) though she later admitted that the 'official routine and luxury' of these years did not

compare to her 'rough, unconventional' existence in New Zealand. She published several books during this period, none with New Zealand themes.

In 1896 Broome died suddenly in Trinidad, and Lady Barker returned a widow a second time to England, where she lived the rest of her life. In 1904, under the name Lady Broome, she published *Colonial Memories*, a substantial work about the many countries she had lived in. The book's first chapter, 'A Personal Story,' is an autobiographical piece which gives interesting information about Lady Barker's life before, during and after her stay in New Zealand. Four later chapters deal with 'old' and 'modern' New Zealand, recycling material from *Station Life in New Zealand* and *Station Amusements in New Zealand* while adding more recent observations about the country and the progress Lady Barker deemed it to have made in the 40 years since she first saw it. The tone is wistful and melancholy; excitement and adventure, the writer plainly feels, are in the past.

Lady Barker died in London on 6 March 1911. Her death was noted, especially in New Zealand, where *Station Life in New Zealand* was and continues to be much loved. 'She was a woman whose literary style reflected a bright and happy temperament,' stated the obituarist in the *Christchurch Press* of 9 March, adding that she had possessed 'a decided gift of humour.'

Lady Barker was a conventional, if talented, writer. Some of her attitudes, especially those relating to class, can seem patronizing to modern readers. But in *Station Life in New Zealand* she caught very exactly what it was like to be young and adventurous in one small part of the British Empire.

LINKS

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[DNZB](#)

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