

UNVEILING HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF HER-STORY: ELIZABETH MACARTHUR IN A ROOM MADE OF LEAVES

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Abstract:

This paper explores Louis Montrose's perspectives on New Historicism, focusing on how literary texts reflect historical contexts and how individual historical authenticity impacts both history and literature. It argues that the overlooked individual historical narratives can enhance and refine our understanding of history. To illustrate this, the paper examines Kate Grenville's novel *A Room Made of Leaves*, which is recognized for amplifying marginalized voices in Australia. Grenville reconstructs and edits the memoirs and letters of Mrs Elizabeth Macarthur, shedding light on her pivotal role in establishing the Australian Merino Wool Industry—a contribution that has been largely ignored. By uncovering this often-misrepresented history through Macarthur's memoirs, the paper challenges the established historical records and scrutinizes the authenticity of historical accounts.

Keywords: silenced voice, history, Her-story, literature.

New Historicism emerge as one of the critical literary approach in the late 20th century, challenging the notion that literary texts can be interpreted independently in their historical context. According to this perspective, any text is shaped by the author's personal experiences and the political and social circumstances of their time. Understanding major events from the period in which a text was written can enhance readers' comprehension and reveal specific time-related nuances and interpretations within the work. Louis Montrose, in discussing New Historicism, remarks that it addresses "the textuality of history and the historicity of texts" (Mambrol). This means that history is constructed and often fictionalized, reflecting the perspectives of mainstream narratives such as: prominent leaders and major events like the World Wars. As Kate Grenville notes, "Australian history, like most histories, is mainly about men" (1); Australian history has been recorded from a predominantly white perspective, leaving the experiences of indigenous people largely unheard. Grenville also critiques this bias, stating that "The people who are in that begotten place want to put it about that it is a success. These reports were written by men with their own fish to fry!" (Grenville 86).

Montrose's concept of the "historicity of a text" emphasizes how texts are deeply embedded within their socio-political contexts and carry their own historical narratives. This

can involve a text reflecting the author's personal experiences, significant political or social events that impact the author's life, or an author's effort to chronicle a notable individual through letters, personal accounts, and memoirs. Such collections often contribute to the mainstream historical record, which may overlook less prominent figures. For instance, who would have thought that a young girl's diary could become a crucial work on the Holocaust? These literary works enhance our understanding of history by filling gaps left by conventional accounts.

In her memoir, Elizabeth Macarthur questions the nature of history, suggesting that it is not static but constantly evolving. She reflects, "How can there be the history? Beyond one, watertight and trim, lies another, just as watertight, just as trim" (Grenville 9). Her memoir challenges the accepted version of Australian history and reveals how historical narratives can shift over time. Montrose's notion of the "textuality of history" and the "historicity of texts" underscores the interplay between literature and history. Literature enriches historical understanding by bringing to light hidden stories and voices that mainstream histories often overlook.

This paper, educates Montrose's perspective, and examines Kate Grenville's novel *A Room Made of Leaves*. Through this work, Grenville brings attention to Elizabeth Macarthur, a significant yet overlooked figure in history. By exploring Grenville's novel, the paper aims to highlight how literature can reveal the contributions of unsung heroes and challenge established historical narratives.

Losing her father at a young age, Elizabeth finds solace in working with her grandfather, tending the flocks, which brought her joy. She learns about cross-breeding, various breeds, and their special qualities. She fondly recalls, "But I had Grandfather, who loved me, and stood smiling as I tackled my first sheep with the shears, clipping away as he had shown me, until the creature was in two separate parts: a bald, bony, shrunken animal in one place, and a heap of fleece in another" (Grenville 25). As she enters womanhood, she is taught that discussing fields, farming, and flocks is not considered ladylike. Consequently, she makes a deliberate shift from farm life to becoming the wife of a soldier.

In stark contrast, John Macarthur is arrogant and overly proud of his modest success. He is a ruthless and single-minded individual, characterized by bullying, flattery, and a volatile temperament, doing whatever it took to achieve his goals. His domineering nature is well-documented in history; as his fame grew, he became a usurper, politician, and a highly influential figure after the couple moved to New South Wales. Despite enduring much, Elizabeth manages to create a small, personal world for herself with the sheep. Simone de Beauvoir notes that the condition of women throughout history is marked by a certain contradiction: while women have consistently faced subjugation, they have also managed to assert their own independence.

Macarthur wants his portrait to be painted from a specific angle, with detailed instructions on how his facial features, so as to conceal any flaws. Similarly, he instructs the painter on how his wife should be depicted, specifying that she should have curls and

dimples. As a result, the portraits available on websites do not accurately represent John Macarthur or Elizabeth Macarthur. Elizabeth reflects on this, saying, “By the time Mr. Macarthur was satisfied that the sketch matched his vision of what his wife should look like, I was pretty sure no one would recognize me in this dainty figure, all curls and dimples” (Grenville 11). John Macarthur is very particular about how he and his wife should be portrayed in their portraits. Elizabeth herself reflects on this situation, noting that by the time her husband is satisfied with the painting of her, it no longer resemble her real self but instead depicts an ideal and somewhat artificial version of her, characterized by exaggerated curls and dimples. This shows how records are manipulated to the whims and fancies of the dominant.

Although Macarthur had no knowledge of flock management, he decides to purchase sheep from various parts of the world—Ireland, India, and Spain. His primary goal is to increase the number of sheep, without regard for the breed or the process of improving their quality. Elizabeth notes, “Mr. Macarthur did not care to touch, but I did... But Macarthur cared nothing for wool or hair, only about the numbers. Hannaford and I watched him trying to count the sheep, losing count, and trying again” (Grenville 268). Elizabeth and Hannaford, who shares a common interest in sheep management, takes care of the flocks. Coming from the same region, they are skilled in shearing, breeding, and cross-breeding sheep to achieve better results, and they knowledgeable about the specialties of each breed, whether for meat or wool.

The Australian Merino Wool Industry begins while Mr. Macarthur is in England for a four-year term and later for eight years due to his trial—stemming from his involvement in an inappropriate duel with a Commanding Officer and the deposition of a Governor. During this time, Mrs. Elizabeth Macarthur manages the 100-acre farm in New South Wales for over a decade. Running such a large farming enterprise, breeding fine-wool sheep, and managing a workforce of brutalized convicts is no easy task. Elizabeth establishes the foundation for the Australian Merino Wool Industry, but she is recognized as ‘a founder’ rather than ‘the founder’ of the industry. She has some letters addressed to Jane and Mr. Macarthur that serve as evidence of her role in this significant project. Despite Mr. Macarthur’s influential status in England and New South Wales, his promotion of Merino wool did not justly earn him the title of ‘the founder’ of the Australian Merino Wool Industry. As Grenville observes, “But here is the thing: the Australian merino – the sheep we rode on the back of -- was mostly developed during the years that John Macarthur was in England. It looks very much as though the Father of the Wool Industry must actually have been the Mother of the Wool Industry: his wife” (Grenville 3).

The researcher highlights a significant historical misattribution of credit. Although John Macarthur is widely recognized as the founder of the Australian Merino Wool Industry, it is actually Elizabeth Macarthur who laid the groundwork for this industry during his absence. This suggests that historical narratives often overlook or diminish the contributions of women, even when they play a crucial role in foundational achievements. According to Stephen Greenblatt, New Historicism seeks to examine how a text interacts with its historical context, emphasizing that texts are not separate from their time but are intricately connected

to and influenced by the conditions in which they were created. Thus, this novel portrays the condition of women and voices out their oppression.

Her recognition as ‘a founder’ rather than ‘the founder’ reflects broader issues of gender bias in historical recognition. The fact that she manages the farm and develops the Merino wool industry, while her husband receives the more prominent recognition, underscores how influential figures can overshadow the significant contributions of their partners. Secondly, the researcher sheds light on John Macarthur’s influence and public recognition that skews the historical narrative. His influential status and ability to promote the Merino wool industry in England allows him to claim a more prominent title than might have been warranted by his actual involvement. This underscores how power and influence can affect historical accounts and the attribution of achievements. Her management of the farm, handling of convicts, and development of the wool industry are pivotal, yet her contributions are frequently overshadowed by her husband’s more publicized achievements. This reflects a broader issue where women’s work, especially in the historical context, is frequently underappreciated or unrecognized.

To this day, history honors Mr. John Macarthur by naming institutes and streets after him, while Elizabeth Macarthur remains largely uncelebrated. Throughout her memoir, she frequently emphasizes her favorite phrase: “Do not judge too quickly!” This serves as a subtle reminder to the readers who have historically credited Mr. Macarthur as the Father of the Wool Industry. In reality, it is Elizabeth, the Mother of the Wool Industry, who established it. She reflects, “At some point in the distant future, a reader might examine all these documents, seeking to uncover the past. To that person, and to you, the reader of these words, I can only say: Do not believe too quickly!” (Grenville 9).

This case study demonstrates how many heroes have been overshadowed and relegated to the role of sidekicks. Without Elizabeth Macarthur’s letters or memoirs, she might have been remembered merely as another female settler, and her significant contributions might have remained hidden. These documents have uncovered her true role as a key figure. While history can be trusted, it is not always completely accurate. Just as a literary student conducts background research to better understand a text, it is crucial to examine texts, especially semi-biographical accounts, journal writings, or personal recordings of often-overlooked individuals to know her-story better.

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