PRELUDE

dubious reputations

Nineteenth-century port cities suffered from dubious reputations. Colonial Sydney and Cape Town were spaces of transience, designed for the movement of people, goods and information. Fortunes could be made and new identities forged in these liminal zones between land and sea. But there was also the ever-present danger of slipping back from a position of respectability and status. Scandal played an indispensable role in these forces of opportunity and risk, forces that would see the foundation of new and lasting social boundaries by the middle of the century.

The problem was that in colonial cities people could be other than what they seemed. With a large proportion of newcomers and itinerant visitors, residents had a certain degree of licence to reinvent themselves. This was a domain for opportunists. Some concealed identities were more spectacular than others. The Austrian Baron Charles Von Hügel (who showed an aristocratic disdain for most of the society of New South Wales, whether formerly convicted or not) considered that the story of a convict confidence trickster who passed himself off as an English viscount in the early 1830s was 'highly characteristic of the country in which it took place'.[1] Many would have agreed that the ability to transcend past origins and masquerade in new identities was especially common to antipodean lands founded as penal colonies. But in fact this was a phenomenon also associated with the wider colonial world.

The supposed Viscount Lascelles was in reality a convict who had served out his time in Van Diemen's Land. Evidently a man of some insight, he clearly sought to take advantage of the known propensity of the British Government to enquire endlessly into the workings of the transportation system. In the New South Wales interior, he made the rounds of colonial society, claiming that he had been commissioned by the Secretary of State to enquire into the proper treatment of the convicts. He managed to set up an elaborate tissue of lies as to why his identity was not universally known, and gave out that he was travelling incognito to keep his commission confidential. The fact that the real Edward Lascelles's father, the second Earl of Harewood, was a Tory politician might have lent his claims some degree of verisimilitude. 'He went about with a great briefcase,' von Hügel noted, 'and wrote down every complaint brought up by convicts, ticket-of-leave men and emancipists.' No doubt he was extensively entertained by those who sought to bend the ministerial ear and had memories of previous investigations and their consequences still fresh in their minds. The erstwhile felon's career as a viscount was put to an end only by the publication of a warning in the *Government Gazette* and a warrant being issued for his arrest.[2] Thus concluded his lengthy and brazen pursuit of duplicity, which included eloping with one Lilius Dickson, the daughter of a Sydney family, in 1833. Lilius and Lascelles spent several days together at an inn in nearby Parramatta before she was reclaimed by her parents. Lascelles compounded the public scandal by seeking Miss Dickson's return through the auspices of the Supreme Court, in which he is listed in the judge's notebook as 'calling himself Edward Lord Viscount Lacelles, eldest son of Earl Harewood' (showing that the impostor had at least got his genealogy correct). With no evidence of a marriage forthcoming, his application was denied.[3] Von Hügel noted with amusement that Lilius Dickson, despite her tarnished reputation, was soon married to the nephew of Justice James Dowling. The Baron acknowledged as he told the story that the new Mrs Dowling had 'not so far been seen in society'.[4] Nevertheless, he saw in this 'the insensitiveness of most of the inhabitants of the colony to what would, in other countries, be an indelible disgrace in a family'.[5] In fact, Dowling's personal notes on the Lascelles case, over which he presided, give the lie to this. He was mortified by his nephew's marriage to a woman whose 'light reputation' was of more concern to him than her possible convict connections. Out of 'respect for the honest & virtuous prejudices of the world' he was determined that he would never 'regard her as a member of the Dowling family'.[6] As the dust temporarily settled, the inhabitants of Sydney talked over the scandalous elopement, the Earl wrote tetchily to his agents, 'I have no idea who the Impostor is', and his minions set about the task of dealing with the attempts to defraud their master by claims of powers of attorney.[7]

Clothes (and briefcase) maketh the man, as the putative Lascelles clearly knew. Between 1816 and 1828 British army surgeon James Barry cut a notable figure on the streets of Cape Town, accompanied by his beloved poodle Psyche. Slight in build and short of stature he sported the ornate dress of a military doctor: high-heeled boots (with three-inch concealed false soles) and an elaborate uniform, rumoured to be padded, topped off with an enormous plumed cocked hat. Personal physician to Lord Charles Somerset, that most determinedly aristocratic of colonial governors, and his family, Barry also fulfilled the posts of medical inspector for the Cape Colony and principle medical officer of the army at the Cape. Barry walked a dangerous tightrope throughout his life. Persistent rumour and controversy dogged his time as a physician at the Cape and elsewhere in a long and varied career over the British colonial realm. This was not only the result of his effeminate demeanour and flamboyant appearance and personality but also because of his assertive manner and demands for medical reform. His dominant personality involved him in repeated personal and professional conflicts. Florence Nightingale openly detested him. While at the Cape, Barry fought a duel with Josias Cloete, aide de camp to Governor Somerset. The weapon of choice was pistols and both combatants departed unscathed.

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Although Barry's life was punctuated by scandals, none matched the furore that erupted after his death, when the servant who laid out Dr Barry's body claimed that it was that of a woman and that she had borne a child. Barry's sex has never been satisfactorily determined. That he (the doctor's own pronoun of choice) was hiding something is evident in the many mysteries that pervade his life. That a woman had pursued the career of a spectacularly successful surgeon was certainly hard for contemporaries to accept. Some asserted at the time (and have since) that Barry's body was that of a hermaphrodite, a person of physically indeterminate sex.

Barry aroused both passionate support and opposition, and public feeling about him was bound up in his close relationship with a governor whose autocratic rule of the Cape was encountering much opposition in the 1820s. Things came to a head in a scandalous incident in 1824, in which an anonymous scurrilous placard was posted one night accusing Barry and Somerset of being engaged in a homosexual relationship. Barry's various biographers seem to concur that the two may well have been sexually involved, although the precise nature of their relationship remains as disputed as Barry's sex. The placard was an expression of the popular opposition to the Somerset administration that was rife in the colony during this period and associated with Somerset's high-handed attempt to stamp out a free press. The man found to be behind the placard was yet another impostor of the colonial world. William Edwards had been masquerading as an attorney at the Cape until he was exposed as an escaped convict from New South Wales. At the time of the placard incident he was in jail awaiting deportation to Botany Bay.

Barry's supreme skill as a surgeon (in 1826 he performed a caesarean section which both mother and child survived), a hospital reformer and an administrator evidently helped him to weather the storm. He left the colony in 1828 with a dinner in his honour given by various prominent citizens of the city. His medical legacy at the Cape had been impressive, and his famous obstetrical success—amongst the first in the world—bequeathed his name to the successive male line of the fortunate family whose mother and child he had saved. The ultimate result was the splendid historical circumstance of James Barry Munnik Hertzog, Afrikaner Nationalist politician and leading proponent of segregation as Prime Minister of South Africa in the 1920s and 1930s, having as his namesake an emancipationist reformer of mysterious sexuality.[8]

Such spectacularly scandalous instances of concealed identity were of course not the norm. Yet stories such as these fed into contemporary concerns about the manner in which status and identity could be re-invented in the colonies. This disquiet pervaded British discourse about colonial society and lent a self-conscious edge to those asserting their respectability in cities like Cape Town and Sydney. The colonial middle class was of varied origin, the invention of its own social and economic ambition. It was this very fluidity and the ability to transcend antecedents that made colonial society a sphere of both opportunity and anxiety. 'The housemaid marries,' wrote one visitor to the Cape in the 1820s, 'and then comes and stands in the same quadrille with her *ci-devant* [former] mistress; and ladies have begun by washing the drawing rooms in which they now receive the best company.'[9] Similarly, George Bennett complained a decade later that the 'insolence' of assigned convicts in New South Wales would lead a stranger to 'imagine the master to be under obligation to the servant'.[10] These were worlds turned upside-down, but they were endeavouring to right themselves. By the middle of the nineteenth century the division between the respectable and the disreputable was becoming increasingly stark. We cannot understand how this division came about without understanding scandal in the colonies.

Practices of exclusion continue to structure life in these two erstwhile colonial cities. This book is the story of a vital moment in the foundation of such social boundaries. It argues that the elaboration of these boundaries, and the construction of the colonial bourgeoisie in Sydney and Cape Town, are both inextricably linked to the place of these cities in the wider cultural bonds of British imperialism. During the first half of the nineteenth century, colonists attempted to re-invent themselves and their society as respectable according to British cultural models that were themselves in flux and to throw off the legacies of slavery and convict labour that marred their reputations. In the 'tensions of empire' by which the categories of both coloniser and colonised were elaborated, the colonial project was inherently unstable and anxious.[11] The power ultimately wielded by whites in settler societies should not blind us to the fact that, during the nineteenth century, Europeans in the colonies were 'so often viewed disparagingly from the metropole as *parvenus*, cultural incompetents, morally suspect, and indeed "fictive" Europeans, somehow distinct from the real thing'.[12] In the course of these transformations, social status and civil liberties were redefined in a process that would lead to the establishment of representative political institutions. The local legislatures that fulfilled the aspirations of the colonial bourgeoisie in the middle of the century were cast in the language of universality, yet they were based on notions of exclusion. Who was incorporated and who left out of the structures of power at this time would help direct the trajectory of development of both colonies well into the postcolonial period. The story of scandal in the colonies allows us to trace the connection between the large politics of the state and the small politics of private life that made up the relations of colonial power.[13]

The evolving culture of manners in which the inhabitants of Cape Town and Sydney participated was part of a connected imperial culture with specific aims of social and political restructuring. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the establishment of a respectable society along

British lines was a global phenomenon coming into contact with the specific fluidities of local conditions.[14] The creation of proper models of behaviour for inclusion within and exclusion from a white bourgeoisie was proceeding through internal transformations within Britain as well as on a wider imperial stage. Studying the cultures of empire highlights not only the connections between metropolitan centre and colonial periphery but also those between distinct colonial peripheries such as the Cape and New South Wales. In the negotiation between local and imperial concerns new models of society and politics emerged and personal reputation and colonial destiny were forged.

Empires are assemblages of networks of information and these cultural linkages are an important element in historically specific moments of globalisation.[15] By writing Australia and South Africa into the wider cultural history of British imperialism this book sets out to complicate readings of their pasts as national stories. Bound up in their own particularistic concerns (be they the foundations of South African racism or Australian egalitarianism)[16] historians have largely failed to view their national histories within the broader cultural framework of British imperialism. The net of transnational history could, of course, be cast far wider than the two cities I have chosen. In one sense the limitation is practical and allows the story of colonial scandal to be told with reference to the specifics of local circumstances. In another sense the choice of these two particular cities is entirely deliberate. The problem of unfree labour—whether slaves or convicts—was amongst the most pressing issues occupying imperial society during this period. Bonded labour was an especially troubling force in the construction of the bourgeois culture of empire. Tracing the elaboration of a respectable culture in two cities which had to deal with the problem of slavery and convict labour respectively is particularly pertinent to the broader question of colonial reputation. Both colonies came under British control at broadly similar times—the last quarter of the eighteenth century—although the Cape had a longer Dutch heritage that reached back to the 1650s. By the 1820s, the period at which this study begins, both were firmly established as British imperial urban centres. This is not to argue that these two colonies were the same, for of course they were not. But the similar inflections in urban bourgeois identity that we see in this story eloquently demonstrate the emerging power of an imperial culture. By the middle of the century, the end of the period covered by this book, these cities had large white settled populations that would ultimately forge the idea of a specifically white nation.

Imperial interconnections were central to the broader culture and networks of knowledge and power of the British Empire. Colonists were aware of their place within this imperial system where they were in implicit, and sometimes explicit, competition for emigrants and resources. The colonial bourgeoisie in Cape Town and Sydney were grappling with similar problems in creating and protecting social status on the imperial periphery. A cross-colonial perspective allows resonances to be drawn out and seemingly parochial issues to be seen as indicative of far broader and more general concerns. These cities had in common a host of imperial administrators, who operated in one or another of the colonies over the course of their careers. But the connections go far beyond the specific individuals or direct links between the Cape and New South Wales alone. The British Empire was connected by a vast circuit of constantly moving personnel and the port cities show particularly clearly the links that bound it together in this period. While the tyranny of distance was by no means overcome, the imperial network was above all a network of information. It was held together by the movement of people and paper: publications from throughout the empire, private letters and endless official documentation. What was gossip in Cape Town could soon become gossip in Sydney, Calcutta or London. The British imperial military and bureaucracy was a relatively small community, with individuals moving frequently between different stations. Much like the expatriate community of a modern multinational corporation, the minutiae of their intimate lives was the stuff of relatively common knowledge, however geographically dispersed. The routine circulation of metropolitan and colonial newspapers through the entire imperial network and the systematic inclusion by editors of extracts from other publications meant that news in Cape Town and Sydney had a surprising global aspect. For this reason, the stakes of reputation in colonial scandals were somewhat higher than we might initially expect. Imperial bureaucrats in London could be

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unexpectedly familiar with the details of local gossip, part of the seamless whole the imperial system wove across its domain.[17]

Scandal offers a useful point from which to follow these routes. It opens up fruitful possibilities as we approach the complex question of status in the colonial world, in investigating what combination of personal behaviour, social connections and material possessions allowed men and women claims to respectability. It gives us access to the rituals of exclusion and inclusion that operated in the daily lived experience of ordinary women and men. It allows us to draw connections between these small politics and the large politics of social change. It intersects with the question of how boundaries were laid down in societies where, ostensibly, civil liberties were growing with the end of transportation and slavery and the establishment of representative governments. These social practices of exclusion were part of the larger questions of who would exercise power in these communities and what sort of societies the Cape and New South Wales would become. Battles over status, with scandal playing a crucial part, informed the rules and hierarchy of these societies.

Scandal and gossip are essentially about the management of reputation. They play indispensable roles in the construction of community by disseminating socially relevant information which enables individuals to be positioned within a group. Biological anthropologist Robin Dunbar even argues that the practice of gossip, involving vital information exchange about personal relations, played a central role in human evolution and the development of language.[18] We may baulk at attributing the evolution of humans to gossip and scandal, but their importance as avenues of historical investigation is hard to ignore. For the historian, these social forces reveal the moral values of a group and the boundaries of acceptable conduct. They act as a means of social control by prescribing behaviour and commenting on transgression.[19] It is certainly necessary to try to define scandal as it operated in colonial society. But to tie the definition down too precisely is to rob it of its power and to impose a false degree of structure on what was in fact a highly diffuse and fractured social force. The very unpredictability of scandal was an inherent part of its social impact, as contemporaries were well aware.

As Oscar Wilde quipped in *Lady Windemere's Fan*, 'gossip is charming! History is merely gossip. But scandal is gossip made tedious by morality.'[20] In fact both practices involve moral judgement, although gossip is not necessarily censorious. Gossip will quickly transform into scandal if a transgression is deemed to warrant it and can operate as a conduit to more public forms of moral disapproval.[21] The distinction between the two is most usefully made as one between private speech and public discourse. Gossip becomes scandal when a tacit agreement to keep information as private communication within a select circle is broken—hence the term *open scandal*. Scandal therefore leaves clearer traces in the historical record. Yet the division between the two should not be overstated. The connections between silence, private speech and public discourse are complex and profound, as shown by the travails of the Wylde family told in chapter 1.

Scandal publicises the transgression of a society's norms and values, but norms and values are debated features of social life, especially in communities undergoing such rapid social change as Sydney and Cape Town. Thus scandals are apt to be rather messy affairs, with unexpected effects, for they involve the alleged transgression of boundaries that are themselves under construction and contestation. They are not just about the transgression of the culture of manners, but also 'about the cultivation or assertion of the values or norms themselves.'[22] As the events of a scandal unfold, as disclosures are made and accusations and counter-accusations traded, the focus of community morality can shift in diverse ways, often to the immense discomfort of accusers and accused alike. Because scandals depend on the facts being known to those other than the participants, they involve dramas of knowledge and concealment as people try to find out as well as to hide transgressive behaviour. For the historian, as for contemporary observers, the secret at the heart of a scandal, the 'truth' if you will, usually remains elusive. In the pages that follow we will frequently share the frustration of the original observers. Despite the promptings of narrative greed, it is often more productive to use scandals as a route into cultural meaning than to search for the truth of what actually occurred.[23]

Scandal in the colonies had its own peculiar caste. If port cities are generally places in flux, then colonial port cities were particularly plagued by issues of social ambivalence and confusion. They were domains in which identities were unfixed, in which many people were not what they seemed, and where old positions and identities could be cast off and new ones invented. Small cities were linked in the vast transcontinental movement of people and information, at once intensely parochial and inherently cosmopolitan. The position of scandal was Janus-faced in communities that were both pre-industrial and linked into the globalising force of the world's first industrial nation. Cape Town and Sydney were small enough for gossip and scandal to work much as it did in the pre-industrial world, as an agent that bound the community together by means of talk, defined outsiders and insiders, and policed its members while reinforcing moral values.[24] These cities remained face-to-face communities during the first half of the nineteenth century. The everyday business of men and women was generally well known to their neighbours (often much to their chagrin). Even the most prominent or notorious members of the community were not disembodied names or faces but were known at least by repute. Elite colonial society was an even more close-knit circle, bound together by kinship, intermarriage, commercial contacts and political allegiance. The scandals that emerged from what hidden life was possible in these intimately connected communities soon became universally notorious. This was a widely recognised aspect of colonial life, used in court to argue for the especially 'serious import' of libellous publications in the colonies compared with the metropole.[25] Yet scandals in the colonies were also enacted on the global stage of the British Empire. These might be pre-industrial societies in one sense, but in another they were cities whose vibrant local press and connections with the world's first industrial nation allowed some of the characteristics we associate with the scandals of the mass media to be made manifest. In this moment of transition we can see the beginnings of forces that shape our own world. Just as they do in the early twenty-first century, scandal and gossip in the British Empire wove together local and global communities of knowledge. Scandals reveal how metropole and colony were bound together in a web of transmitted information that sought to fix status in an unstable social world. Reputation was a resource with empire-wide implications, as Sydney businessman Francis Short recognised in 1826 when he argued that an accusation of perjury made against him in the *Sydney Gazette* 'might be read in England, at the Cape, and in India'.[26] Scandal in Sydney and Cape Town had the potential to do damage on a global stage.

Scandals, then, involve battles over knowledge and power in the construction of reputation. Reputation can be understood as a resource for individuals in a highly competitive social world, one closely linked to concrete issues of opportunity and loss. These forces applied not only to individuals but to entire societies. It is possible to make broad comparative arguments about globalising processes without losing the texture of the local situation or the richness of everyday life. Issues of scandal and respectability were important ingredients not only in life's chances for individual men and women, and in how they conducted themselves from day to day, but also in the broader trajectories of imperial policy and in the organisation of colonial society. With that in mind, this book approaches the story of scandal in the colonies through two main themes. It looks at issues of scandal and status in everyday life, and discusses how men and women claimed and maintained status in the small power struggles of day-to-day existence. It also looks at the reputation of the two colonies as a whole and discusses their relationship with the mother country during the emergence of new models of society and politics, culminating in the moment when the first representative institutions were established. The emphasis here is on scandal as political discourse. The language of moral transgression, which informed everyday social interaction and which was invoked in private scandals, was also marshalled to promote and resist social change in the political arena. The dynamics of social exclusion are to be found as much in the small rituals of daily life as in a community's laws and constitution.

Thus the story of scandal in the colonies is part of the wider story of the emergence of a British imperial culture of respectability. This was intimately tied to new models of political culture in both metropole and colony that put forward a new conception of the public sphere.[27] This was the domain, mediating between society and the State, in which public opinion could be heard. It was intimately connected in both practical and symbolic ways to new cultural forms. The print culture that emerged in opposition to the aristocratic privileges of the ancient regime went far beyond the publications on which it was based. It was not only about reading, but about discussing what one had read, often in coffee houses and other spheres of masculine public assembly. It was a way of seeing the world, of claiming the right to express ideas publicly on the basis of virtue rather than birth and of seeking to influence change through public opinion. The public sphere meant freedom of speech, of association and of the press. These were rights that were battled for across the imperial world (including Britain) in this period.[28] While the penal character of New South Wales in the earlier decades adversely affected the civil rights of all, neither colony provided extensive liberty for its settlers. Both were part of a British imperial system which, in the 1780–1830 period, was overwhelmingly autocratic in character and (still mindful of the experience in the American Colonies) wary of the demands of local elites.[29]

While based on a language of universal rights, these new ideas about political rights were exclusionary by their very nature. Gender, race and class were all central to their boundaries. The public was not sexually neutral, for the very definition of this sphere was based upon the exclusion of a private, feminine world.[30] The social contract of rule by mutual consent for those admitted to the public sphere was essentially ‘fraternal’—open only to men who premised their claim to political representation upon their power over women and children.[31] Women’s role in this new order lay in the socialisation of future citizens. It was within the domestic sphere that the necessary civic virtues would be instilled in children.[32] It was also to provide a ‘privatised haven’ from the public world for middle-class men.[33] The separation between public and private spheres and masculine and feminine worlds was not new; what strengthened the distinction was the emergence of a new kind of politics associated with masculinity.[34]

In communities in social flux, respectability was a weapon to be wielded in the context of rapid social mobility. For emigrants, whether voluntary or involuntary, Cape Town and Sydney offered the chance to cast off old associations and invent a new identity. Financial opportunities could provide material backing for a new place in the social order. Whether or not expectations were realised, there was a sense that the colonial setting was more flexible than Europe itself. The result was a ceaseless jockeying for position. In both cities, emerging new elites in this period sought to establish an appropriate reputation in the eyes of both their own milieu and the imperial overlord. In this, they were in some senses fighting a losing battle since colonists tended to be viewed disparagingly from the metropole. Colonial gentility was uneasy for precisely this reason, despite the irony of Britain’s own increased social mobility in this period.[35] For colonies with the stigma of penal settlement, the consequences were particularly pertinent, but both the Cape and New South Wales exhibit analogous sensitivity to metropolitan disdain. Colonial identity cannot be understood in isolation—it was constructed under the constantly imagined gaze of the metropole.

Concern about the colony’s image amounted almost to an obsession. Roger Therry, an Irishman who lived much of his life in the Australian colonies, satirised this in his story of an elite colonial woman who declined to attend a public ball since her name did not appear on the committee: ‘“It matters not,” she said, “what some persons in the colony may say or do, for here my rank is too well known to be doubted; but *what will the people of England say when they read the list of the committee and do not notice my name there?*”’[36] Therry was intending to mock the ‘ludicrous’ attention paid to observances of social precedence in colonial societies, but he unwittingly goes to the heart of the matter. Elite men and women were obsessed with the attitude of Britain towards every aspect of their lives. Public events and scandals in the colonies, both major and minor, were constantly accompanied by the question of how they would be considered in Britain. In this, the colonists were more rational than Therry gave them credit for. Their future remained firmly in the hands of the British Parliament and, therefore, indirectly tied to British public opinion. In matters such as state-sponsored emigration, the abolition of slavery, the abolition or resumption of transportation, or the foundation of colonial legislatures, the image of colonial society in the eyes of the British authorities had important consequences.

New South Wales may have had particular problems with the so-called ‘shame of Botany Bay’, but it was not alone in its colonial self-consciousness. Sydney and Cape Town attempted to better their image in this period, making conforming to the cultural attributes of British ethnicity an increasing part of the definition of respectability. Whether in material culture, housing style, gender relations or politics, the colonial middle class was aware that adherence to a British model held out the best hopes of social acceptability. That the British definition of middle-class respectability was itself unstable added a further element of complexity to the cultures of empire.

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Respectability had concrete implications in daily life for men and women who aspired to inclusion within the ranks of the colonial middle classes. It was a weapon to be wielded in the social competition whereby each would find their level in the new society. Godfrey Charles Mundy was five years resident in New South Wales as deputy-adjutant-general of the military forces in Australia and a close associate of Governor FitzRoy. In his gossipy chronicle of life in the antipodes, he made fun of colonial social pretensions, even as he understood the reasoning behind them. During a discussion of female precedence, he overheard a woman assert that she was ‘the rankest lady present!’[37] In the eyes of a disdainful metropole, she may have been more accurate than she knew. The imperial bourgeoisie was persistently concerned to transcend this uneasy gentility and to reap the rewards of a secure reputation for themselves and their colony.