

**Classic Australian Stories**  
*General Editor: Lesley Zuber*

**THE LETTERS  
OF  
RACHEL HENNING**

*Adapted by Ida Veitch*

NELSON

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## Glossary

- Blacksmith:** a man who makes and repairs things of iron and who shoes horses
- Bonnet:** a lady's hat with ribbons that tied under the chin, and a large curved brim
- Boomerang:** a curved stick of hard wood that can be thrown so that it returns to the person who threw it
- Bullock:** a castrated bull. Bullocks were used to pull drays. Two or more bullocks harnessed to a dray were called a bullock team
- Bushman:** a man who knows how to live in the bush
- Coach:** a passenger carriage pulled by a team of horses
- Colonial experience:** learning what it is like to live and work in a colony
- Crocodile:** a large river reptile with a long body and tail, covered with a hard skin
- Damper:** a sort of bread made by mixing flour and water to form a dough. The dough is baked in the hot ashes of the camp-fire
- Digger:** a man who digs for gold
- Diphtheria:** a serious, infectious disease of the throat
- Dog-cart:** a small, open carriage, usually pulled by one horse

**Dray:** a low, flat, four-wheeled cart, without sides, used to carry heavy loads and pulled by a team of bullocks or horses

**Drive animals:** move a mob of cattle, sheep or horses on foot across country

**Flirt:** try to attract someone of the opposite sex, without meaning anything serious

**Flog:** punish someone by hitting him with a whip

**Gully:** a narrow channel on the side of a hill, made by the action of rainwater on the land

**Harness:** leather straps used to attach a horse or bullock to the vehicle it is going to pull

**Muslin:** thin, fine, cotton cloth

**Pack-horse:** a horse used for carrying luggage. The luggage was packed in bags that were strapped on the horse

**Pannikin:** a small metal cup

**Petrified wood:** wood that has become stone by the action of mineral deposits

**Pet lamb:** a lamb whose mother has died and who is looked after and fed by humans

**Platypus:** A small water animal with webbed feet and a duck-like bill

**Pot:** round metal container for liquids. A *pint-pot* holds one pint, a *quart-pot* holds one quart (one quart equals 1.14 of a litre)

**Ransom:** a sum of money paid to obtain a prisoner's freedom

**Rcin:** a long, narrow strap that is fastened to the bridle of a horse and used to control the horse

**Saddle:** a leather seat for the rider of a horse

**Saw-man:** a man who was employed by a station-owner to cut wood needed for building

**Scrub:** bushes and very small trees growing close together

**Sheep-dog:** a dog trained to collect and drive sheep

**Slab:** a thick, flat piece of wood

**Stretcher:** a bed made of a piece of canvas stretched between two long sticks of wood. The legs are made of pieces of wood in the shape of an X

**Stock:** animals; usually sheep, cattle or horses

**stockman:** a man who works with animals on a station;

**stockwhip:** a whip with a very long lash, used by stockmen;

**stock-yard:** a fenced area where a mob of animals can be kept together for a day or two

**Tinker:** try to repair something in an inept way

**Tipsy:** slightly drunk; a little drunk

**Tramp:** a man without a home. He spends his life walking the roads

## Introduction

Rachel Henning wrote the letters in this book between 1854 and 1865.

Rachel's father was a clergyman who lived in Dorset, England. He married Rachel Lydia Biddulph in 1825, and Rachel Henning was the eldest of their five children. Her sister, Etta, married the Reverend Thomas White Boyce. Most of Rachel's letters were written to Etta or to Mr Boyce. Rachel always called her brother-in-law Mr Boyce.

In 1853 Rachel's brother, Biddulph, and her sister, Annie, set sail for Australia, taking sixty days to travel between Liverpool, England, and Melbourne, Australia. Rachel soon decided to go to Australia, too. In 1854 she and her sister, Amy, left England. They travelled with their cousin, Tregenna. Rachel's first letter in this book is from the ship *Calcutta*.

This first time, Rachel stayed only two years in Australia. She was homesick for England, and she did not like the climate, the scenery or the society of New South Wales.

Rachel stayed five years back in England, where she lived most of the time with Etta and Mr Boyce. In 1861 Rachel returned to Australia for the rest of her life.

## Leaving England

Aboard the *Calcutta*,  
August 1854

My Dearest Eitta,

I am writing to you today because we hope to send letters home when the ship calls at St Vincent's.

Amy, Tregenna and I watched you from the deck of the ship on that rainy morning when we left. We watched until we could not see you. Then we went inside the saloon and talked about you. We talked and thought of you and home until it was time for dinner.

Amy and I looked at all the passengers. There was only one we liked. She is very pleasant and good-tempered and, I think, a lady. We are lucky, because she is sharing our cabin.

She is going to Melbourne with her uncle and brother. Her uncle is a queer old gentleman. He makes jokes all the time and objects to shaving. The brother is a good-tempered boy of fourteen.

Our cabin is really very comfortable. We put away all our things after dinner and found plenty of room for them. I hammered in some nails to hang our

clothes on. No one objected. Our cabin is directly over the propeller, so I think they did not hear the hammering!

It poured with rain the whole of Friday, so that we could not go on deck and see the last of old England. We have had very fine weather since then. We have had some wind so the ship has gone very quickly. Yesterday, the wind got stronger. They stopped the engine and we went along under sail. I thought the movement was very pleasant, but the ship rolled about a good deal more.

Some of the passengers have been dreadfully ill. I was seasick all one afternoon, but I was better in the evening and have felt very well ever since. The voyage is exactly what I had expected. It is very dull, and three months seems a long time to spend on this ship. However, day after day will pass, I suppose.

We have breakfast at 9 am. They give us a huge breakfast. We have hot meat, and potatoes, and fish, etc. We have lunch at 12 pm, and dine at 4 pm. The cook certainly feeds the menagerie very well. We get soup and fish, all sorts of meat and poultry, pudding and fruit. Tea is at 7 pm, then we stay on deck until it is dark. This is the only pleasant part of the day. There was a full moon last night, and the sea was most beautiful.

We do not know many of the other passengers. There are very few women among them, and hardly any real ladies.

Mr and Mrs Donaldson think they are the great people on board. He is actually a member of the

Australian Parliament (I did not know they had one). He is very fat, very bossy, and eats a great deal. Mrs Donaldson is handsome and affected and has not been married very long. She has been dreadfully seasick.

Then there is a dismal-looking Mrs Macdonald. She is going to Melbourne to look for her husband. He has not been heard of for two years, so I do not think she can be very hopeful!

There are eight or ten children on board. They do not bother us much, as they live mostly on deck. One baby screams all night long.

If we ever survive to reach Australia, I am sure we will stay there for life. I do not think I could undertake another voyage even to get home again. It is most wearisome; the noise is wearisome, the people are wearisome and life is wearisome. It is too hot to work. I am getting quite tired of novels, and there are no other books on board.

How pretty England must be looking now. I keep thinking of the green woods. I wonder how the flowers are getting on in your garden, and how the ducks are. Do you often walk in the woods?

Good-bye, my dearest Erta. Kind love to Mr Boyce, with very much love,  
Your affectionate sister,

*Rachel Henning*

## New South Wales

When Rachel and Amy arrived in Australia, they went to live with Biddulph and Annie. Biddulph was renting a farm at Appin, sixteen kilometres south of Campbelltown, New South Wales. Rachel's next letter was to her brother-in-law, Mr Boyce, Etta's husband.

Elladale Cottage,  
Appin,  
29 March 1855

My Dear Mr Boyce,

Thank you for your note to me. I received it at Sydney, where I spent the first two months of this year.

I returned to Appin on the fifth of this month. I cannot say that I was glad to get back again, but I found that matters here are a lot better. The servant I sent up from Sydney turned out to be a very good one. There is now no need for us to do the hard work.

There has been some rain so the fields look greener and the cattle do not look so much like skeletons. Amy has become a very good cook, and I am happy to leave the cooking to her. I help to weigh flour and

beat eggs. I mend stockings, and after dinner I read to Amy while she works or sews. Sometimes I draw or paint. We walk in the bush for exercise, or I walk down to Appin for the letters. In the evening we play cribbage and backgammon, or work and read and go to bed at nine. The days pass quickly enough, but not very pleasantly.

I dislike this bush life very much. I sometimes find it difficult to amuse myself. At home in England the days used to seem too short for what I had to do.

I am sure Biddulph will never make any money on this farm. The soil is very, very poor, and people say this is the driest part of Australia. Often, when there have been torrents of rain at Wollongong and Sydney, on each side of us, we have not had a drop of rain here. There are no springs on the farm, only a water-hole. That was dry for nearly six months in the summer, and then we had to get water from the George's River, three miles away. It is a pity Biddulph ever took this farm. However, he has gained some experience, and will not lose much money. Biddulph has changed so much. He is now a steady, thoughtful man of business. I can hardly believe he is the same person as the almost childish schoolboy who left England. Fortunately, he has lost none of his gentleness, or simplicity of character.

He has just gone out with one of the workmen. They are going to cut down a bee-tree. Biddulph is dressed up in an enormous blue shirt belonging to one of the men and has a thin silk handkerchief tied over his hat. He is wearing my gardening gloves. I



hope he will get some honey and not many stings!  
We now have plenty of butter and milk and we sell some of the butter at one of the shops. We get two shillings a pound for it. We have a few little potatoes and some pumpkins, but we cannot get much to grow in this dry soil, and the hens scratch up the few things that do grow. We have a lot of chickens. We have already killed and eaten some, though they are not very plump.

It is now autumn, and so feels more like England. Today it is pouring with rain, like a genuine English November day. Amy is much happier in the cool weather, and I was tired of the perpetual glare of sunshine. Fine days here are too numerous, and too hot.

The pictures of home you sent us are hanging in our sitting-room. We long for England whenever we look at them. We are waiting for letters from home, although I cannot say it is a pleasure when we get them. An English letter makes me miserable for at least a day. I feel so homesick. But I have grumbled too much.

My kindest love to Etta and yourself,

*Rachel Hemming*

Appin,  
16 July 1855

My Dear Mr Boyce,

I hardly know how to thank you for your kindness. Thank you for being so sorry about our unhappiness in our life in the bush. And thank you very much for inviting us all to return to England and live with you and Etta. I accept with gratitude.

I can only speak for myself. Amy is to be married here. She is engaged to Mr Thomas Sloman. He is a banker, and he and Amy will live in Bathurst. Annie has decided to remain with Biddulph. She says she does not want to go home to England. She insists that this life suits her and that she really likes the bush. I can only hope that she is speaking the truth. I know she likes Sydney. She has a great number of friends there, and it is a pleasant place to visit.

The climate at Appin did not agree with Amy. I hope Bathurst will suit her better. I am only sorry that Bathurst is so far from Sydney.

Biddulph has just read me an advertisement from the *Herald*. It says that there is now a coach travelling between Sydney and Bathurst. It starts from Sydney on Monday morning, and arrives at Bathurst at twelve on Saturday night. It takes twelve passengers. The coach has every accommodation for those sleeping in it. I suppose there are no four-poster beds! I hope Mr Sloman soon decides to move to Sydney!

We are glad to get the *Illustrated News* you send us. The pictures of the frozen River Thames and the



snow in the streets seem so strange out here.

Believe me, your affectionate sister-in-law,  
*Rachel Henning*

Amy Henning married Thomas Sloman on 6 December 1855, and went to live in Bathurst. At about the same time, Biddulph bought land on Bulli Mountain. It was about 300 metres above sea level, with a wonderful view out to sea. Biddulph started building a house on the land. Annie went to Bathurst with Amy and Mr Sloman, and Rachel stayed for a while with friends in Sydney. From there, she wrote to her sister, Etta.

Redfern,  
14 December 1855

My Dearest Etta,

It was most annoying that I was not able to send off the parcel to you earlier. There is something in it for each of you. Amy has sent you pictures of herself and Mr Sloman. Hers is pretty good, though rather fierce-looking.

Biddulph has sent Mr Boyce the skin of a platypus. It is one of the natural curiosities of Australia. I have put a lot of pepper on it. I hope it is too dry to produce those gigantic maggots you found in the last box of skins from Australia. There is also a book of Australian views. They are not great works of art, but I am sure you will like to see them. I have put a cross against the places we know.

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Please do not be surprised by the parcel of Biddulph's old clothes. He has sent the ancient coat, trousers and waistcoat so that the tailor will know what size Biddulph is. Clothes are so dear and so bad out here that Biddulph would like you to send him a lot from England. I have to finish this letter tonight, so that it can go on the next mail-boat.

With love to Mr Boyce and yourself,

*Rachel Henning*

Redfern,  
3 March 1856

My Dearest Annie,

I must write to you today, as it is your birthday. I hope you will have a happy day, at Bathurst. At least you will be with dear Amy.

Do you remember your birthday before we left England? We were at Ventnor, on a fine, cold spring day. We took a walk along the cliffs, and found the first primroses by a stream. Oh, Annie, if only we were all at home together once more!

But I must not be dismal, so I will tell you about a party we went to. Somehow it was not a very brilliant affair. Captain Tucker did not dance with spirit, and the music was so wretchedly bad. Lizzie Tucker played the first waltz for us to dance to, and a most doleful tune it was. Emily played a polka next. I usually love to dance the polka, but Emily played so hopelessly out of tune that I could only stand still. It

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was like that all evening, although there was a little singing, and we had a very nice supper. We had to leave early, so I did not hear Captain Tucker sing *The Whale*. I am sorry to have missed it. It is such fun to hear Captain Tucker sing. Please give my kindest love to dear Amy.

Ever your affectionate,

*Rachel Henning*

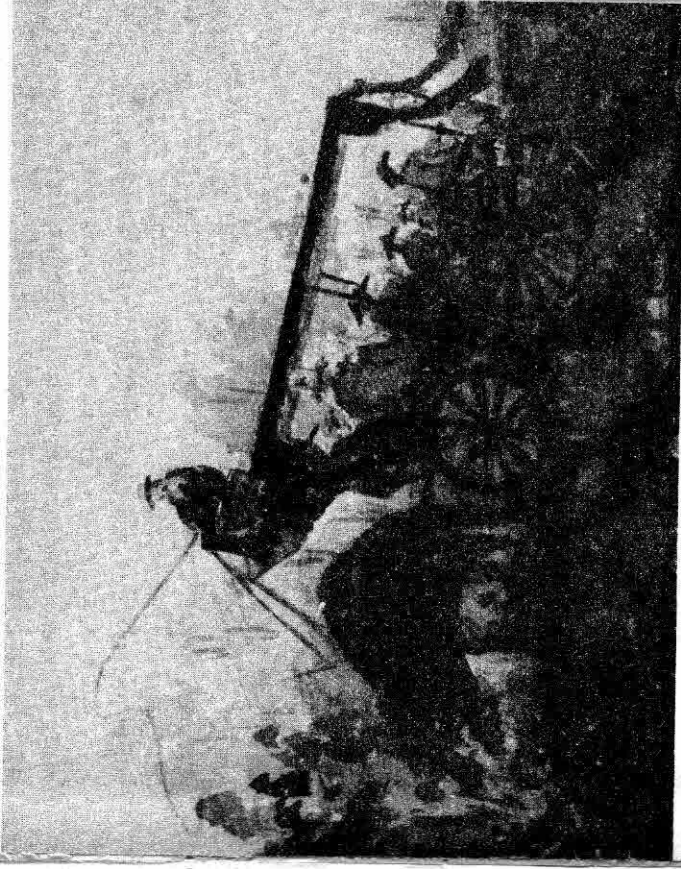
Soon after this, Annie came back from Bathurst and went to live at Bulli with Biddulph. Rachel went to visit Amy. From Bathurst, Rachel wrote to Annie.

Bathurst,  
17 April 1856

My Dearest Annie,

I am at last in Bathurst. The journey was long, but I got on famously. The ride to Penrith at night was rather pleasant. It was a fine night, and there were only two other people in the coach; an old farmer and a young digger. The digger went all the way to Penrith. He was very polite and helped me and my luggage in and out of the coach. He was not quite a gentleman, nor yet a common man.

The roads were in a most awful state. The driver from Penrith to Hartley said he had never seen them so bad. The road going up the Blue Mountains was



A coach

almost impassable. We went along for four or five miles with the axle buried in mud. I cannot think how the horses ever did it at all.

We passed one carriage that was stuck in the mud. The two horses had not been able to pull it out. The horses were unharnessed and were standing by the side of the road. A gentleman, who was up to his knees in mud, and a stupid Irishman were trying to fasten four bullocks to the coach. Our coachman got down and helped them. He said we might want help ourselves later. However, we only had trouble once. We were going through the bush because there was so much mud on the road. One of the horses got frightened and turned off among the trees. It dragged the coach against some small trees and nearly upset it. The men took the horse out of the harness, and the passengers got out while the coachman backed the coach out of the bush.

The road was better when we got to the top of the mountains. The view down Mount Victoria was very fine, certainly, but not equal to Snowdon, by any means. There are rocks and woods, and the view is perhaps more extensive, but there are no beautiful streams. And although I am not a coward, I would have enjoyed it more if we had not been going at a fast trot down that steep hill. There was a steep precipice on one side, and no fences. A coach was upset there some time ago. Eleven passengers were either killed or badly injured.

At Hartley I got a comfortable room, but very little to eat. I could not touch the raw beef and bad pork. I

had to dine on biscuits and wine. The last day's journey was very tiresome. The sun was so hot I got a headache and in the afternoon there was a thunder-storm. It did not last long, but the rain came pelting down. I did not get very wet, thanks to my shawls and umbrella, but you may imagine how muddy I got.

How curious these Bathurst Plains are, when you first see them. There are so many miles without a single tree, and the road was quite dusty. Mr Sloman met me at the coach office and walked home with me. Amy was looking very well and glad to see me. I had some tea and went to bed early. I was not so very tired, though. I can bear shaking up better than most people. All my bones are set so loosely!

Bathurst is an ugly place, all brick and dust. I think Amy's house is comfortable enough inside, and I feel sure I will enjoy my time with her. But she has a very bad servant, who does not know anything. She has just made the worst apple-pie I have ever tasted.

Your affectionate sister,

*Rachel Henning*

Bathurst,  
14 May 1856

My Dearest Etta,

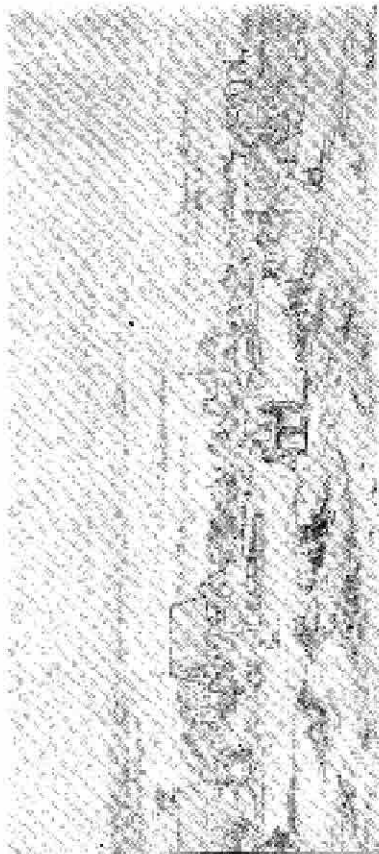
Thank you for your letters. How I love to hear of England. I hope to be back with you there this year. Amy is happy with Mr Sloman, and Annie likes nothing better than Sydney life and looking after

Biddulph at Bulli. Biddulph, also, is very happy in Australia, so I do not think it would be wrong for me to come back to England before everyone there forgets me!

I cannot say I admire the 'city' of Bathurst. It stands in the middle of the Bathurst Plains without a tree or shrub near it. It is all built of red brick, as there is no stone in the district. It blazes away in the sun, and is the most boiling place in summer, and the coldest place in winter in all of Australia. It looks large from a distance because the houses are so scattered about. It looks as though it had rained brick buildings.

There is an immense open space in the middle of the town. Around that space, there is a scattering of churches. One is called 'Norman', though I hope the Normans were never guilty of such an atrocious piece of architecture! There is a Catholic church, with a big square, ugly tower. There is also a Scotch church, covered in pinnacles, a Dissenting chapel, and a prison with a huge brick wall around it. As well, there are a bank and various shops. Everything is one mass of red brick.

What they call plains are, in fact, low hills, which are covered with tufts of brown grass. I sometimes go up a little hill that is near Amy's house. The view from the top is not exactly beautiful, but it is very curious. It is so completely un-English. The hills stretch around you for miles and there is not a tree or shrub upon them. In a hollow below you is the red town. The Macquarie River winds along near it. You



Bathurst

can see the course of the river because river-oaks grow beside it. There is almost no water in the river; only a pool here and there. River-oaks are the most melancholy trees. From a little way away, they look quite black, and they only grow in wet places.

The background of the whole scene is the best part of it. On two sides there are the beautiful Blue Mountains. They are covered with bush right up to the top. They make a lovely contrast to the dreary plains.

I suppose Annie and Amy have told you about Amy's 'cabbage garden'. At present, there are only cabbages and 'Bathurst burrs' in the garden. Bathurst burrs are very uncomfortable plants, like a thistle. They have spiny leaves, and the seed has little hooks on it. They stick to everything. The plant grows in the streets of Bathurst and we never go out anywhere without coming home with Bathurst burrs stuck all over us.

Amy has a very dull servant. The other day, when the servant was coming home from chapel, she fell into a dry water-course. This is a ditch, about seven or eight feet deep. It has no fences, so is a perfect trap for any ripsy inhabitants of Bathurst. Mary was not drunk, but she fell in in the dark. Some kind person fished her out and she came home covered in burrs and very sorry for herself.

Your affectionate sister,

*Rachel Henning*

In 1856, Rachel, terribly homesick, returned to England. She stayed there for nearly five years, with the Boyces and other relatives. Her cousin Tregenna, also went back to England, to get married. From England, Rachel wrote to her sister, Annie.

'The Mount',  
Taunton,  
England,  
11 June 1857

My Dearest Annie,

Aunt and I have just come back from St James's Church. We were there to see Cousin Tregenna and Bella married. We have seen a lot of Bella and I like her very much. I think you will too, when you meet her.

Tregenna was very gentlemanly in a black morning-coat and trousers. He looked much better than his brother, who was very fine in a claret-coloured coat and lilac waistcoat, and grey trousers.

The church was quite full. Bella had six bridesmaids. She wore a muslin dress and a straw bonnet. There were water-lilies and green grass under the brim of the bonnet. The bridesmaids were in white, with white lace bonnets. Their bonnets had rose-buds under the brims. Bella behaved very well, and Tregenna said afterwards that he had not been at all nervous.

Bella and Tregenna will go to Preston for a while, then go out to Australia.

I came here by the express train. I always go by the



express when I can. I think it was the slow Australian horse-wheaches that have given me such a love for fast travelling. I like being back in England very much. Your affectionate sister,

Rachel Henning

In February 1861, Rachel Henning decided to return to Australia. She sailed on the *Great Britain*, and from the ship she wrote to Erta.

*Great Britain*,  
Off Queenstown,  
Friday 22 February 1861

My Dearest Erta,

I have so much to tell you, but first I must assure you that we are all safe and sound. I was very miserable when we lost a lifeboat overboard yesterday. The boat and its oars had the name *Great Britain* painted on them. I thought that if they were washed ashore, people would think the *Great Britain* had sunk in the awful gales we have had. I know how worried you must have been.

As you know, we sailed on Sunday, and on Monday evening it began to blow. During the night we had such a gale! I have never seen one like it. It did blow with a vengeance. The captain and the officers were on deck all night. Indeed, the captain has not been in bed since we left Liverpool. He told me he

had never had the *Great Britain* out in such weather before. However, there was no great damage done, though everyone was extremely ill and very frightened. The wind went down the next day.

On Thursday it began to blow again, and for about six hours we had a terrible hurricane. No one on board had ever seen such a violent wind before.

Fortunately, it came during the morning, and was over by three o'clock in the afternoon. I could not tell you how strong and loud the wind was. Some of the passengers who struggled up to the deck said the *Great Britain*, big though she is, seemed like a toy boat in the waves. They thought that at any moment she would be buried in them.

But the ship behaved very well. She kept sailing strongly, even though she was rolled about in the huge waves. Several waves came on board, and water poured down into the cabins. I found one of my boxes standing in a pool of water.

The wind gradually went down, but there was a lot of damage to the ship, and we put into Queenstown for repairs. So dear is how I am able to send this letter to you.

My love to you, Mr Boyce and the children,  
Rachel Henning

While Rachel was in England, Biddulph and Annie had moved to Marlborough Station, near Ruckhampson, in Queensland. Biddulph wanted to learn how to run a sheep station because he intended to buy a property in Queensland. So when Rachel

arrived back in Australia, Biddulph and Annie were both in Queensland. Ma and Mrs Hirst, who were friends of Annie, asked Rachel to stay with them while she was in Sydney. Rachel did not go to Queensland until August 1862, after Biddulph had bought Examiner Station. Exmoor was further inland from Marlborough. From Sydney, Rachel wrote to Mrs.

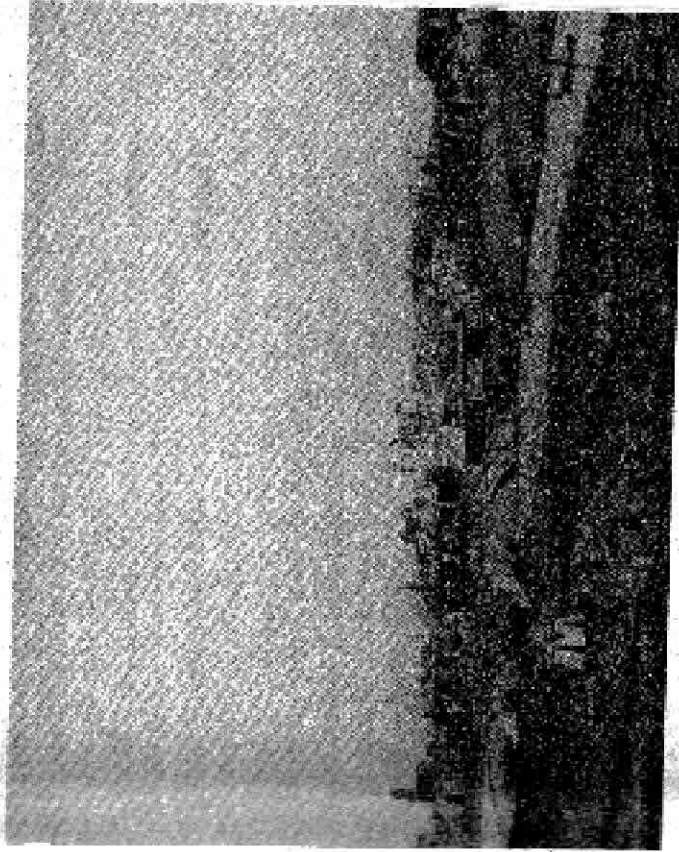
Surry Hills,  
15 May 1861

#### My Dearest Erta,

When we reached Australia, we stayed a few days in Melbourne, and I really enjoyed my visit there. We used to go ashore every morning in the captain's boat after breakfast. We spent the day on shore, and returned for dinner at five. In the evenings we amused ourselves with music or cards or chess.

We spent one day in seeing Melbourne, its shops and streets and grand buildings. And a very fine town it is, too; far better than Sydney. The second day we went up the river to the Botanical Gardens and the Zoological Gardens. And one day we had a picnic, about seven miles up the Yarra.

We took two days to come by steamer from Melbourne, and entered Sydney very late on Thursday night. I did not expect anyone to meet me, but as soon as we anchored Annie's friend, Mr Macmichael, came on board. He had been waiting at the wharf for me, and I thought it was very kind of him. He wanted me to come out to Surry Hills at once, but I really could not waken the Hirsts so late at



Melbourne