It was probably the good, practical sense of most Victorian women travellers which assisted in the separation of the meanings given to "a woman who travels in search of adventure" and "an adventuress" - a term still current in the 1860s; but Melina Rorke’s narrative shows that at the end of the nineteenth century, a woman who travelled in the hope of finding new possibilities in her own life was still likely to have something of the Becky Sharpe in her. Like her literary foremother, Rorke too had to take defiant risks which were based on a penetrating insight into the ways of her world, especially in matters of gender. In both cases, the personal satisfactions sought had to take a social form; the difference was that while a Becky Sharpe would strive to climb to a position of advantage in a long-established society, Melina Rorke trusted that a comparatively new world would bring the new possibilities she sought.

In the early 1890s, Melina Rorke travelled by ox-wagon from the diamond-mining town of Kimberley to the region she calls "Lobengula’s territory," the land that was fast being appropriated by European mining financiers and would become Rhodesia. A few years later, she was among the earliest white settlers in Bulawayo where she lived until the outbreak of the second Anglo-Boer War. During the fighting, she ran a military field hospital with the Rhodesian forces and was awarded the Royal Red Cross for her work. Recent information, given on the dust-jacket of the reprint of her autobiography, indicates that some time after peace was established, probably by 1908, she emigrated to the USA where, it is thought, she became an actress. Thirty years later, she published, in America and Britain, an autobiographical account of her adventures in Southern Africa.1


2 *The Story of Melina Rorke R.R.C.* (New York: Greystone, 1938); *Melina Rorke: Her Amazing Experiences in the Stormy Nineties of South Africa’s Story, Told by Herself.*
In 1971 a facsimile of this narrative was brought out by the Rhodesiana Reprint Library; its brief “Publisher’s Introduction” warns the reader that while the “historical framework ... is basically sound” and the “author’s experiences are ... typical of their day,” the narrative “suffers from an irreverent handling of factual detail” (n.p.). To a reader of autobiography familiar with the workings of memory and with the selection and ordering of material that is necessarily involved in the shaping of a life-story, this stern warning against irreverence might seem to come from a rather naive assumption that a life is an object and that objectivity and accuracy are the hallmarks of history-writing and should be for life-writing too. On the other hand, the fact that particular alterations, evasions, inventions and embellishments can be identified in Melina Rorke’s narrative offers an opportunity for enquiry which should not be passed over by casting them as part of the reshaping inevitably required by narrative.

The fabrications in Melina Rorke’s narrative are important when taken as indications of her dissatisfaction with the constraints within which she had to live and of her desire, when telling her story, to create alternatives. Dorothy Driver has argued that the problem of surplus women in Britain at the turn of the century (for which the colonies were a ready solution) should also be seen as a problem of surplus in women: increasingly, they were threatening to break free of the social categories of masculine and feminine by which their lives were limited.\(^3\) Driver quotes Spivak’s formulation of this point – that the control of women has sometimes involved the removal of an “excess”;\(^4\) while Spivak’s particular illustration is of physical removal, her observation also alerts us to the non-physical forms of control such as the editorial warning against the “irreverence” in Rorke’s narrative. In order to resist this wish to control, the “excess” evident in Rorke’s fabrications can be read as an indication of the dangerous energy with which she must have combatted her own subjection in daily life; as a textual sign, this “excess” is a refusal to conform to the accepted masculine grammar and voice of travel and life-writing. It can be read as an “italicized version of what passes for the neutral or standard face”\(^5\) of such genres.

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