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**‘Imperial Debris in Janet Frame’s *To the Is-Land* (1982)’**

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**Abstract:** This article explores Janet Frame’s first autobiography *To the Is-Land,* reading Frame’s relentless cataloguing of objects as indicative of her wider, post-imperial, life writing project. Frame insists that her ancestors (white, Scottish settlers who arrived in the country as part of a chain migration) ‘survive as a presence in objects [such] as a leather workbag, a pair of ribbed butter pats, a handful of salmon spoons’ (7). But the meaning of these objects is never stable: they are frequently lost, broken, or their significance is misinterpreted. Reading against the grain of this insistent cataloguing, I argue that these objects are detritus, rather than heirlooms and that Frame’s life writing is filled with imperial debris which resists colonial taxonomies. Through this strategic confusion of objects and origin stories, Frame challenges an understanding of empire as a beginning point or determinant within her life writing.

**Key words:** Janet Frame, empire, objects, autobiography

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By the time of her death in 2004, Janet Frame had published eleven novels, three volumes of autobiography, along with several collections of short stories and poetry. She had become a foundational figure within New Zealand literary culture and occupied, in the words of her biographer Michael King, the awkward title of ‘New Zealand’s best known but least public author’ (King 2004). A steady stream of posthumous publications have further added to Frame’s considerable oeuvre. But as Claire Bazin suggests, had it not been for the immediate popularity of her autobiographies during the 1980s, Frame’s ‘novels, poetry and even short stories might have been forgotten’ (2011, 4). The publication of *To the Is-Land,* (1982) *An Angel at My Table* (1984)and *The Envoy From Mirror City* (1985)significantlychanged and shaped the reception of Frame’s writing. In particular, the arrival of *To the Is-Land* heralded a seismic shift in her career. According to King, at the beginning of 1982 Frame remained a reclusive writer living ‘in a small New Zealand city known to and read by a minority of aficionados’, while by its end ‘she was a nationally known figure, a best-selling author and a holder of one of the country's highest civic awards’ (2001, 451).

Frame’s life writing bears witness to a childhood imbued with the legacies of British colonial rule. Her formal education offered consistent ‘praise of the Empire, the King, the Governor-General, the Anzacs at Gallipoli, Robert Falcon Scott at the South Pole’ (1990, 34). Her early understanding of British imperialism moves here in ever-widening concentric circles, expanding from the central, male figure of the imperial monarch to polar exploration in Antarctica; the various models of colonial masculinity which dominated Frame’s childhood are imagined as, quite literally, spanning the globe. But while previous readings of Frame as a postcolonial author (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989, McLeod 2004) have focussed largely upon her account of travelling to Britain in the third volume of her autobiography, *The* *Envoy From Mirror City,* I suggest that a preoccupation with empire can in fact be found *throughout* Frame’s three autobiographies. In particular, my reading of *To the Is-Land* positions her first autobiography within what Stuart Murray describes as ‘the international context that sees New Zealand as one country, among others, wrestling with the legacy of a British colonial heritage’ (1998, 18).

*To the Is-Land* ostensibly narrates the first eighteen years of Janet Frame’s life, describing her childhood in a family of ‘railway people’ and their various homes across the South Island. Beginning with a description of Frame’s shadowy Flemish ancestors, who travelled to New Zealand in the mid-nineteenth century, she explains how her upbringing was interwoven with stories of these mythical predecessors. The tales of who ‘did this, was this, lived and died there and there’ were part of the fabric of family life (10). Through this exploration of her origins, Frame constructs an understanding of her ancestral beginnings not as a concrete fact or record, but instead as a set of shifting familial myths. Meanwhile, *To the Is-Land* also records how Frame’s early years were punctuated by a series of calamitous events, including her brother Bruddie’s epilepsy and her sister’s later death by drowning, aged fourteen, which left ‘a blankness, a Myrtle-missing part’ in family life (88). At the end of *To the Is-Land,* travelling to begin training at a teachers’ college,Frame prepares for what she calls ‘my Future’, discarding her old nicknames of ‘Nini and Fuzzy and Jean’ and practicing a new signature of ‘Janet Paterson Frame’ in her notebooks (140).[[1]](#endnote-1) Frame’s first autobiography thus begins with a genealogy which obscures her ancestral origins and ends with a signatory act which complicates her status as the named author of the text.

I suggest that Frame’s deliberate disordering of the record of her life is a vital and hitherto neglected aspect of her autobiographical project. Frame’s repeated, even obsessive, inventories of objects in *To the Is-Land* are, in actuality, used to conceal a lack of other narrative detail. What appears initially to be an ordering impulse in her life writing, manifest in catalogues and lists, functions as a distinct form of disorder. The connections between these items, and even their meaning, is frequently uncertain. More specifically, the deliberate disassembly of lineage, inheritances and even material heirlooms in *To the Is-Land* challenges an understanding of empire as an origin point or determinant within Frame’s life writing. She repeatedly frustrates any attempt to trace her family’s history as Scottish settlers, rejecting the fixed origins and known genealogies which would place her as the successor to such imperial beginnings.

The European colonisation of New Zealand began, as Anne Salmond outlines, with the voyage of the *HMS* *Endeavour* and is therefore inseparable from a particular kind of colonial order which employed Linnaean taxonomy and cartography in an attempt to ‘examine, analyse, count, classify and record’ (2017, 34**)**. Salmond’s comments, specific here to New Zealand, reflect Edward Said’s broader arguments that imperialism ‘relentlessly codified and observed everything […] so thoroughly and in so detailed a manner as to leave few items untouched’ (1994, 222). Attempts to impose a colonial order, which were inscribed into the earliest Pakeha-Maori encounters, sought to transform the newly discovered islands and their inhabitants into a series of bounded entities. In the latter half of this article, I suggest that Frame’s strategy of life writing, which eschews linear histories in favour of more complex genealogies – at times even pursuing anti-genealogical accounts of Frame’s life – also responds to these imperial legacies through a collection of disordered heirlooms and unruly objects. In so doing her autobiographies reject what Said, Salmond and Ann Laura Stoler – following Michel Foucault – have identified as the colonial ‘order of things’.

The connections between objects and empire in *To the Is-Land* are apparent in the first description of Frame’s childhood home. Here she traces the history of its furnishings, explaining that these were bought by her parents

When Dad returned from the war. He and Mother set up house in Richardson Street, St Kilda, Dunedin, helped by a rehabilitation loan of twenty-five pounds, with which they bought one wooden kerb, one hearth rug, two Morris dining chairs, one duchesse, one oval dining table, one iron bedstead and flock mattress, one kitchen mat, these items being listed on the document of loan with a chilling reminder that while the loan remained unpaid, the King’s representative (the agreement was between ‘His Majesty the King and George Samuel Frame’) had the right to enter the Frame household to inspect and report on the condition of the “said furniture and fittings” (9-10).

As King explains in his biography, George Frame ‘responded to the call of King and Empire’ in 1916 before returning, somewhat reluctantly, to New Zealand in 1919 (16). New Zealand was an official Dominion in the aftermath of the First World War and the Frame family home was, according to *To the Is-Land*, built and arranged through the finances of empire. The ‘rehabilitation loan of twenty-five pounds’ was a modest reward for her father’s military service to Britain.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Through this catalogue of household objects, Frame imagines imperial authority as a physical intruder within the family home, creeping through individual rooms to comment and inspect upon their upkeep. Prying into the intimate corners of daily life, the aftermath of the British Empire is not a distant, impersonal force but a daily trespasser within the house, with the imperial agent acting as a personified representative of the King. Frame’s description of her childhood home firstly suggests the family’s subjugation to a colonial taxonomy as their household furnishings are ordered and arranged through the King’s loan. But Frame also describes her family as being mortgaged to an imperial power through the twinned figures of the royal representative and the sovereign. Here she indicates the importance of the royal presence not only within formal colonies, but also within communities long after official decolonisation. As David Cannadine notes ‘the imperial monarchy intruded itself into the individual lives and collective consciousness of imperial subjects in numerous ways and at many levels’ including the many coins and stamps which bore the monarch’s face (2001, 103). The sovereign’s image, reproduced on everyday items such as currency and stamps, thus circulated through the most intimate spaces of households in colonies and former colonies across the globe. This specific description of the document of loan, and its conditions, demonstrates how the imperial monarch remained an important, imaginative element in Frame’s daily life long after New Zealand’s independence. As King’s representative is remembered as a snooping, even feared, Frame suggests that the private interiors of her family home were partially configured, furnished and understood through a prism of imperial power.

**Origin Myths and Interior Frontiers**

*To the Is-Land* begins with a description of Frame’s ancestral origins in which she deliberately confounds any attempt to outline her family history. She asks: ‘the ancestors: who were they, the myth and the reality?’ (7). But the distinctions between the mythic and the real are quickly blurred:

as a child I used to boast that the Frames ‘came over with William of Orange’. I have since learned that this may have been so, for Frame is a version of Fleming, Flamand, from the Flemish weavers who settled in the lowlands of Scotland in the fourteenth century. I strengthen the reality or the myth of those ancestors each time I recall that Grandma Frame began working in a Paisley cotton mill when she was eight years old (7).

Here Frame deploys a vague etymology to suggest her connection to Flemish weavers, outlining a continuity between these fourteenth-century European immigrants and her own childhood in Otago. Her family are thus connected, via the ancestors, to longer histories of immigration and settlement than the mass exodus of Scots to New Zealand during the nineteenth century (King 2003, 170). However, William of Orange, proclaimed King of England, Ireland and Scotland in 1689, was not responsible for the Flemish weavers ‘who settled in the lowlands of Scotland in the fourteenth century’ (Frame 1990, 7). Frame’s ancestors migrated two hundred years before William of Orange became William III of England. The lines of continuity Frame appears to draw in this description are duplicitous and, from its earliest rendition in *To the Is-Land*, the record of her family is rendered deliberately unstable. According to King, this connection between Frame, Fleming and Flamand was discovered through a passing conversation at a dinner party (341). The relationship between Frame’s private life and more public histories proves similarly uncertain, with the attempt to trace the etymology of her name proving just as inaccurate as the initial boast that her family ‘came over with William of Orange’.

The connection between reality and myth is therefore capricious from the earliest beginnings of Frame’s autobiography. She *was* the immediate descendant of Scots who had travelled to New Zealand as part of a mass migration scheme, but her connection to Flemish weavers is far less certain. From the opening chapters of *To the Is-Land,* Frame’s genealogy as a settler is charged with invention and her provenance obscured. To understand how this destabilisation might be read through and across New Zealand’s colonial past, I turn to Anne McClintock’s description of ‘the crisis of origins’ as one of ‘the stalwart themes of colonial discourse’ (1995, 28). She contends that colonial ‘“discovery” is always late’ as ‘the inaugural scene is never in fact inaugural or ordinary: something has always gone before’ (28). McClintock therefore argues that extravagant acts of colonial arrival were so contingent on the *invention* of origins that these beginnings had to be marked visibly, through flags, names on maps or the construction of monuments (30). I suggest that Frame’s own, uncertain beginnings respond to this crisis of origins by laying bare her own processes of creation. Her ancestors are a fluid myth supplied and maintained by multiple acts of storytelling. By drawing attention to the artificial nature of origin myths and implying that such narratives are always invented, Frame refuses to anchor her autobiographies to an inaugural moment of colonial discovery. Her life narrative will not be co-opted into the wider imagined community of the nation through a celebration of the imperial past. Frame therefore rejects the origin stories which might connect her to celebrated histories of colonial arrival. *To the Is-Land,* rather than rehearsing or reciting the lines of Frame's family tree, pursues an anti-genealogical route, which rejects linear narratives of imperial progress and declines to position Frame as the successor to her ancestral beginnings.

If Frame’s lineage is not grounded in the evidence of an ordered, catalogued archive, nor confined to the genealogical certainties of a family tree, then her provenance as the descendent of settlers is manifest in associations, vague etymology and the language of myth. On the one hand, this problematisation of truth operates as a powerful riposte to the suspicions of Frame’s early critics that the origins of her life would explain the complexities of her fiction, rebuffing those readers who insisted that her writing concealed ‘some skeleton in the oedipal closet’ (Evans 1993, 17). On the other, the confusion of objects and origins in *To the Is-Land* alsofunctionsas a highly suggestive postcolonial manoeuvre. The mythologised origin stories and crowded domestic spaces in Frame’s first autobiography are — to use Ann Laura Stoler’s term — ‘interior frontiers’ (2010, 80). These private spaces bear the imprint of public, imperial histories and destabilise their continuing influence in the present. Importantly, Frame’s descriptions of cluttered intimate spaces or lost heirlooms refuses, through confusion and disarray, a colonial order in which Frame becomes the certain inheritor to her white settler ancestry.

The houses Frame inhabits in her first autobiography are littered with furnishings, objects and documents which, initially, offer tantalising glimpses into the family’s beginnings. Many of these items are made by hand, the result of the family’s ‘passion for making things’ (7). When first describing her father, Frame explains that:

Like his father, our Grandad Frame, a blacksmith who made our fire pokers, the boot-last and even the wooden spurtle smoothed with stirring the morning porridge, my father survives as a presence in such objects as a leather workbag, a pair of ribbed butter pats, a handful of salmon spoons (7).

This description suggests that hand-made objects might offer a connection between the living and the dead, invested as these items are with the memories of their original creators. Meanwhile, the spurtle, a wooden kitchen tool designed to stir porridge, dates back to fifteenth century Scotland and thus promises a further connection to the mythical Flemish ancestors. Yet, once again, such possible points of origin prove misleading. These objects suggest not the presence of Frame’s paternal relatives within the text, but rather their absence. Neither Grandad Frame nor Frame’s father are brought into focus by the fire pokers, the boot-last or the pair of ribbed butter pats. Both men remain largely elusive presences within Frame’s autobiography and these mismatched items conceal rather than reveal the details of their lives. The carefully described materiality of these items, made of iron, wood and leather, obscures how insubstantial their supposedly significant meanings are. While this particular description of the fire-pokers and the spurtle have been described by critics as ‘objects of use, things produced by the family labour’ and interpreted as evidence of the Frame family’s ‘genealogies, geographies of place, origins, myths and memories’, I read these objects as conveying precisely the opposite (Wevers 2009, 59). Their unstable meaning — in which the spurtle gestures to a tenuous originary myth of Flemish ancestors and Frame’s father haunts a handful of innocuous salmon spoons — indicates that these are not heirlooms but detritus. Their meanings are not as certain as they first appear. These objects are the leftovers of unknown lives. Instead of providing continuity across the generations of Frame’s family, they demonstrate the absence of origins and the impossibility of known beginnings in her life writing.

Also responding to these descriptions of spurtles and salmon spoons, Mark Williams notes that ‘Frame displays a curiously double attitude towards language’, arguing that her fascination with solid objects is equally matched by a paradoxical tendency ‘to downgrade the referential bias of language’ (1990, 36). The result, Williams argues, is that words become ‘self-enclosed and self-referring structures’ within her work (36). While Frame’s interest in solid objects is indeed complicated by the downgrading of their referential meaning, I read the fluid possibilities of these material goods as responsive to the cultural legacies of empire and colonial order. If the heirlooms of these settler ancestors are revealed to be little more than discarded objects, once again Frame’s position as the inheritor of these colonial histories is called into question. These unruly objects are therefore connected both to the wider interests of Frame’s life writing — to the mythical ancestors who uncouple her from the stabilising coordinates of her family tree — and to the broader context of a mid-twentieth century society which sought new a set of relationships with the colonial past.

Several of these objects, including the erstwhile iron boot-last, reappear in *The Envoy From Mirror City* when, following the death of her parents, Frame returns to the family home. Inside she recounts how the house has been left as it was on the day of her father’s death:

The old iron boot-last was still there, just outside the back door […] My father’s pyjamas hung over a chair. His long cream-colour Mosgiel underpants with a faint brown stain at the crotch lay on the floor; even his last cup of tea sat in its saucer, a swill of tea at the bottom of the cup, making an old brown ridge against the china. […] Books, linen were scattered everywhere (427).

Frame picks her way through these items, which were abandoned in the midst of their everyday use, hoping to reconstruct the family life she has missed during her seven years abroad. Yet she is unable to imagine her father’s final years; even the clothes marked by his body conceal the intimate details she desires. Instead, the boot-last, much like the stained underwear, are the leftovers of life. They are shaped by their original owners’ bodies, outlining their contours — but they reveal little about them.[[3]](#endnote-3) They have become refuse, the waste products marked and discoloured by their once-owners. Moreover, the boot-last and the underpants are inanimate objects which can only *belatedly* mimic the physical form of the human body. While they might testify to bodily functions (the congealed tea at the bottom of the cup indicates thirst, the faintly stained underwear implies excrement) this debris is far-removed from the body itself. The items are scattered, rather than arranged, bereft of an order which might allow Frame or the reader to reconstruct a meaningful narrative of her father’s final years. All that remains are the remains — the mundane details — of his final morning. These possessions, soiled and dirtied with use, indicate how objects in Frame’s autobiographies frequently reveal an absence of life or paradoxically, in the very materiality of their presence, the absence of material histories.

Preparing to leave the property and frustrated by the distance between these discovered objects and their original owner, Frame instead reconfigures them as ‘keepsakes’, insisting that, despite being ‘the pathetic remnants of a family’s life’ each ‘object was alive with its yesterdays’ (432). Her conviction that these items could be turned into heirlooms does not last long. During the journey to her sister’s house, they are transformed, becoming ‘a heap of apparent rubbish — a bundle of frayed linen, an old broken kitchen clock, a chipped ivory chanter with a reed, a stained flybook’ (433). Frayed, broken and chipped they become little more than debris. They cannot and will not reveal the particulars of the family’s intimate lives together, neither will they sustain the dead — as is suggested by the spurtle and boot-last at the beginning of *To the Is-Land* — as a presence amongst the living. These items, initially described as heirlooms to be passed down between the generations of Frame’s family, have become unruly. Here I refocus our attention on how these objects resist particular kinds of order and categorisation, rather than attempting to untangle the many possible, and often frustrated, connections that Frame draws between them.

Andreia Sarabando identifies the incomplete attempts to order and define material possessions within Frame’s writing as part of her habit of ‘cataloguing, often containing long lists enumerating objects, names and people, [with] their elements apparently obeying an arrangement of their own, creating a world that consistently challenges the supposed naturality of human categories’ (2015, 612). Indeed, the transformation of household goods into keepsakes and then finally to disposable junk, indicates an unease — manifest throughout Frame’s life writing — with the categories and meanings ascribed to things. Sarabando concludes that the catalogues ‘of things and objects in [Frame’s] work disclose an ontological vertigo in which everything can be connected, but in which no connection is inevitable’ (613). The challenge to naturalised categories which Sarabando locates in Frame’s writing is distinctly Foucauldian, responding to the challenge, raised in *The Order of Things* (1966)to the classificatory relationship between categories which, according to Foucault, ‘has no existence except in the grid created by a glance’ (2002, xxi). Therefore the order provided by, for example, a classificatory grid, in fact conceals a set of arbitrary relationships between things. Systems such as ‘the classifications of Linnaeus’, an archetypal imperial taxonomy, create a false sense of bounded, discrete entities (xxiv). The ‘ontological vertigo’ Sarabando reads out of Frame’s catalogued objects is catalysed by the dizzying series of unknown connections between them. Building on this, I stipulate that the connections between things, which often prove to be inconsistent in Frame’s life writing, are also a rejection of the classificatory schemes of empire. What Sarabando interprets as a dizzying genealogy is, I suggest, an anti-genealogical manoeuvre and a vital element of Frame’s anti-imperial life writing project.

As imperialism, to use Said’s phrase, ‘dominates, classifies and universally commodifies’, then Frame’s mismatched objects, whose exact meaning is never sure, reject this ordered, universalizing impulse (1994, 225). Indeed, the closer we scrutinize the spoons, the boot-last and the used linen, the more their meaning appears to collapse, evading the very classificatory authority which, as Said notes, European colonial powers were compelled to constantly enact. Frame’s life writing refuses such categorical designs, unstitching the narrative threads which might connect her to the genealogical order of her white settler ancestors. Imperial taxonomies provide a vital context for reading the complex, un-classificatory systems in Frame’s life writing.

Reading across Frame’s autobiographies reveals that the meaning of solid objects are no more stable than the shadowy ancestors and invented origin myths in *To the Is-Land.* The relationship between objects and origins can be discerned within Frame’s description of the ancestors themselves as prized goods: ‘these were the ancestors, then, given as mythical possessions’ (10). Yet the careful descriptions of furnishings and possessions in *To the Is-Land* are as insubstantial as Frame’s uncertain beginnings; objects which initially appear to be heirlooms quickly become detritus which reveal little of Frame’s predecessors, while her family tree is comprised of a fluid set of myths, which are liable to be altered in each retelling. Building on Stoler’s conceptualisation of imperial debris as the ‘physical structures, objects and dispositions’ which continue to contour daily life after colonial rule, I suggest that Frame’s possessions can be read as imperial debris, a detritus of objects which connect the intimate, domestic sphere of her family home with the public histories of British imperialism (2013, 5). This reading is situated within a broader understanding of Frame’s life writing which views her catalogues of leftover items—discarded cutlery and soiled linen—as a rejection of colonial order. Like Foucault’s discussion of Borges’ Chinese encyclopaedia, which highlights the arbitrary connections within systems of categorisation, Frame examines and troubles the relationship between things, pulling apart the apparently steadfast connections between heirlooms and origin stories.

By focussing in on a constellation of mundane, everyday goods, which are often broken and frayed beyond their original intended use, Frame suggests how lingering colonial histories, and the traces of imperial authority, can be found in the minutiae of daily life. In her account of a New Zealand childhood, colonial legacies are found within often-unexpected locations. Yet the anti-imperial disorder which runs through *To the Is-Land* equally resists such categorising, orderly forces. Although all of Frame’s autobiographies are cluttered with solid objects, these rarely deliver on their initial genealogical promise. Instead *To the Is-land* traces an anti-genealogical route through the record of Frame’s early life, one which allows her to engage with, but not be bound by, the ordering structures of the colonial past. What initially appears to be an heirloom, or a vessel invested with the afterlives of the ancestors is frequently revealed to be junk, containing only the leftovers of life. Like the obscured origin stories where family history is shrouded in myth, these objects deliberately confound the attempt to locate exact beginnings in her life writing. In her renderings of colonial remains, Frame reminds us that colonialism remains, tracing the legacies of empire into the cluttered corners of her family home. Through its descriptions of imperial debris, *To The Island* offers both a particular account of life after empire and pursues a future unbound by the ordering, categorical structures of the colonial past.

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**Endnotes**

1. By drawing our attention to this Frame implies that her signed name is an invention, rather than an inheritance (as Frame is her father’s surname and Paterson from her maternal grandmother). This is further complicated by her unusual decision to change her name by deed poll, in 1958, to Nene Janet Paterson Clutha, writing under her birth name, but living with a pseudonym. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Frame had already depicted this episode in the short story ‘Between My Father and the King’. In this fictionalised version Frame’s father creates an alternative litany of goods, debt and payment, charging the sovereign for the damage wrought upon his body during the First World War. As with *To the Is-Land* however, the authority of the post-imperial monarch is manifest as a literal intruder within the home. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The fascination with furnishings and material objects which are impressed by the bodies of their human owners can be found elsewhere (and arguably everywhere) in Frame’s fiction. For example, *The Edge of the Alphabet* (1962) largely takes place in rented rooms where ‘chair[s], all the tables, sofas, even the walls’ must be covered so as ‘not to have the furniture rimmed with tide marks where the human head and arms and legs had rested’ (198). Frame’s fascination with the relationship between furniture and people or with how objects may confer/deny their owner’s personhood, is apparent across her entire oeuvre. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)