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Cheryl Frost. *The Last Explorer. The Life and Work of Louis Favenc.* Townsville: Foundation for Australian Literary Studies, 1983. $5.00 posted. James Cook University Bookshop. 114 pp.

Biographers have been filling the gaps in our literary history, and so the lives of Harpur, Kendall, Clarke, and Kingsley, to mention only the chief older writers, have been covered – or should one say, dealt with. These bulk large enough in their period. It is time for some minor figures to appear.

This modest volume on Ernest Favenc, then, also fills a gap, not a yawning one, to be sure, but a gap nevertheless. And it serves as it were a double purpose, for Favenc lived a sort of double life: he was, as the title notes, the last explorer, and he was also a man of letters – poet, novelist, short story writer, historian, and author of textbooks in geography.

Born in England in 1846, he came to Australia at the age of eighteen, soon found his way to Queensland, and went on a series of expeditions to the north-west of the State. He went also to West Australia and explored there. His reasons for these activities, as Frost points out, were partly a romantic curiosity and partly a more material concern – the chance of taking up land, of becoming, at least for a time, a squatter. He appears to have been a careful and competent leader of expeditions; unlike Burke or Leichhardt, he was never lost or in doubt about his next move.

Frost is candid about her subject: she does not portray the man as a shining knight, nor try to conceal his faults. The most glaring of these – though it was a prejudice widely shared among outback people – was his racism, his attitude to the aborigines. He even took part in "dispersals" (surely one of the grossest euphemisms in our history). It is fair enough to note, however, as Frost does, that these were few, and probably like others he thought he had cause enough. During this period, which ended about 1890, he wrote articles and surveys and reports for newspapers and periodicals. And then he and his wife went to Sydney, where he died in 1908. The period of physical momentum was over.

For the next ten years, 1890-1900 or so, he devoted himself to writing. His three novels and three books of short stories were published. He was a reasonably valued member of the *Bulletin* circle and was acquainted with figures who were to be more widely known than himself, such as Lawson. Apparently the yarning and drinking of these friends he found congenial, and it may have been a pleasant contrast to the life he had previously led. Yet, Frost points out, he was older, more mature, than these men. So one wonders how this period, of constant writing for newspapers and periodicals apart from the *Bulletin*, with money to be earned by using experiences that once were not used but lived, may have appeared to him.

The years from about 1900 to his death seem to have been a slow decline, and the once vital and resourceful bushman walked with a stick. He was, Frost notes, "reported to suffer chronically from Bright's disease, heart disease and jaundice. . .". Still, he had had rather more than thirty years of doing practically nothing but what he enjoyed doing.

The literary critic is not likely to be fully at ease with the biography of a man who is essentially more important as an explorer than as a literary figure. Frost, rightly, devotes more space to his expeditions than to his verse or fiction. She quotes frequently from his often vivid notes and reports appositely and perceptively.

She cannot spend the same kind of space on his fiction. She has devoted considerable pains to tracing his unpublished poems and short stories, and she outlines these with brief comments. The reader of her book feels perhaps what she may have felt – it was her job as a researcher. It is the reader's job to follow her in her dutiful considerations – but how interesting to follow the expeditions. None of this of course is any reproach to Frost; it simply results from the nature of the man. Her virtue in dealing with oddly recalcitrant material, so far as the literary critic with his bias is concerned, lies in her unremitting pursuit of Favenc's scattered stories. Nobody has tracked them down before in such profusion. It is a feat, the reader may feel, that nobody will need to do again.

Nobody, of course, is going to claim that Favenc was an important writer of fiction; but it is possible that some of the uncollected stories have their value as stories or as indications and reflections of their time. If so, then a selection might have interest for the literary historian. Frost would have good claims to editorship.