Peter Pierce

SKILFUL SHAPING

Ernest Favenc, *Tales of the Austral Tropics*, ed. Cheryl Taylor, Colonial Texts Series. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1997. 211pp. ISBN 0-86840-381-4.

It looks like an exemplary 1890s *Bulletin* career. Very soon after the start of the decade, on 15 February 1890, Ernest Favenc (writing as "Delcomyn") published a comic yarn in the *Bulletin* concerning cannibalism, entitled "Long Jim's Appetite: A Back-Country Hair-Raiser." The dead-pan description comes from Cheryl Taylor's introduction to her exemplary edition of Favenc's *Tales of the Austral Tropics*, the latest in the Colonial Texts Series of scholarly editions of nineteenth-century Australian literature. Favenc was a bushman of the highest calibre and a boozer of destructive bent. *The Bulletin* published his verse, generic poems of lamentable outback commonplaces such as "Dead in the Bush," as well as his prose "hair-raiser" yarns of parched plains and crocodile-infested swamps.

Yet Favenc was, in significant respects, an atypical figure. As Taylor observes: "In the early 1890s, Favenc was vastly experienced in bush life, and a generation older than the rising young contributors to the *Bulletin*." Born in England in 1845, he emigrated in 1863, and worked as a jackeroo in northern and central Queensland. In 1878 he led an expedition funded by the *Queenslander* newspaper to test the proposed route of a railway from Brisbane to Port Darwin. Other journeys of exploration followed, to Queensland and Western Australia. Favenc knew the routines and rigours of survival in the bush in ways that Paterson, let alone Lawson, never did. He combined the career of a genuine explorer with that of a writer who introduced and perhaps mythologised the wonders of "the Austral Tropics" for a generation of urban readers. Long before Ion Idriess and Frank Clune, between the wars, Favenc was telling stories of the Nicholson River and the Rumford Plains, vividly imagining a mysterious Australia in order to titillate an audience susceptible to such material precisely because it thought it knew something, if not much, of what he wrote.

In a puffing Preface to the 1892 edition of *Tales of the Austral Tropics*, "Rolf Boldrewood," the champion of romance fiction in Australia, gave a backhanded compliment to Favenc's achievement when he remarked on "the strange romances which write themselves, often in letters of blood, amid the half-unknown, mysterious regions of tropical Australia." The comment unkindly deprecates the author's role in shaping those romances, while at the same time it recognises how material for such romance was a *donnée*, something to

be found in remote Australia, not least because it needed to be.

Thus, Favenc was part of the programmatic literary effort begun by Marcus Clarke and continued by "Boldrewood" and Rosa Praed which aimed to make Australia fit for the liberties of romance, to provide this country with the legends and the history which—in European terms—it had not had time to generate. As Taylor rightly points out, Rider Haggard was the sovereign spirit. His fervid imaginings of terrifying, claustral spaces, caverns and tunnels and underground rivers, of lost races in desert fastnesses, were adopted more enthusiastically by authors in the colonies than in Britain, because the need for such models was stronger there. "A Haunt of the Jinkarras," the first of Favenc's stories included here, depicts a central Australian cavern whose "awful darkness was at times peopled by forms that, for hideous horror, no nightmare could surpass." The writing is slack and formulaic, but that should be leniently understood. It is a code for excitement, for the *frissons* that explorers' journals consistently refused to yield to the expectant reader.

Taylor has well represented the range of short fiction modes in which Favenc worked. His most famous and most anthologised piece, "The Last of Six," relates an episode of cannibalism among escapees from the French prison in New Caledonia who end up in the "mangrove-flats of North Queensland." A revenge tale (ending in madness), and a yarn of horrifying apparitions and a fabulous lost reef (ending likewise), consort with a tale of horse theft, a murder mystery (featuring an infelicitous portrait of a Chinese cook) and a story of a jinxed "big pearl," to which the *Quetta* shipwreck provides the conclusion. In "The Spell of Mas-Hantoo," Favenc ventures to Borneo reminding us how persistently and fruitfully nineteenth-century writers looked east, to the Pacific, and to the lands to the north of Australia, both in life and in art. Henry Kendall, Henry Lawson and Favenc's friend Louis Becke were among the numbers of wandering souls so distracted.

The General Editorial Foreword to the Colonial Texts series outlines a laudable ambition to bring back into print "a range of colonial artistic achievement which has largely dropped from view." And not merely into print: this is a scholarly enterprise, wherein "all potentially authorial forms of the text ... have been located and compared." Taylor's editorial labour has been assiduous and punctilious. The many notes on textual variants are boxed at the bottom of most pages, but the lay-out is clean and clear. Reading for pleasure with indifference to scholarly detail, is unimpeded. Ample and illuminating explanatory notes bring up the rear. Perhaps unexpectedly, it is the black-and-white illustrations—title pages, scenes from the stories that reproduce the rough-hewn forms of their original publication in the

Bulletin—that sometimes produce an effect of disorientation.

Is there a moral? The fare of the *Bulletin* in the 1890s has long ceased to be read as once it was, for distraction, argument, delight or companionship—as "the Bushman's Bible" of legend. Now it is scholarly stuff, whose study enables us—in Taylor's words—to discern "key ideological trends of the decade." Perhaps that is the right emphasis too, in that it makes Favenc more conduit than creator, a skilled shaper of tales, of received prejudices and of settings which—although he knew them intimately and painfully—he transmuted into the symbolic landscapes that Australians have long preferred.

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Maria de la cinta Ramblado Minero

ROSE DE FREYCINET: A WOMAN OF COURAGE

M.S. Rivière, ed. and trans. *A Woman of Courage: The Journal of Rose de Freycinet on her Voyage around the World 1817–1820.* Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1996.

The publication of the journal kept by Rose de Freycinet between 1817 and 1820 during the voyage around the world of the French scientific vessel *Uranie* brings us an important early example of female autobiographical writing. The 23-year-old wife of the ship's captain Louis-Claude de Saulces de Freycinet, Rose stowed away apparently with her husband's collaboration, despite the fact that women were prohibited by royal ordinance from sailing on state vessels. Her journal, written as a series of letters to a friend, records as it happens a young woman's experience of one of the last of the great scientific voyages of the Enlightenment as it marks the changes those experiences bring, and so offers a perspective that could never be found in the official scientific accounts.

Rose's journal provokes two main questions: why did she follow her husband, and what is the significance of her writing? A stopover in Mauritius sheds some light on the former: a series of couplets composed for her there account for her presence by celebrating her love for her husband, but she pointedly refuses to comment on them: "I won't tell you what I think of those verses" (31), she writes. She never says in so many words why she decided to stow away—for love, for adventure, or for both—but her descriptions of what she sees show a young woman hungry for knowledge, albeit not of the scientific kind. She wants to learn about the world, to experience its