

REVIEW

Elizabeth Webby, ed., *Colonial Voices: Letters, Diaries, Journalism and Other Accounts of Nineteenth-Century Australia*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1989. \$16.95 pb. ISBN 0-7022-2171-6.

Readers not familiar with the wealth of nineteenth-century Australian writing will be delighted by the quality, quantity and diversity of material included in Elizabeth Webby's *Colonial Voices*. The governing principle of her selection has been 'the delight of discovery' and each of the extracts from letters, diaries and other forms of writing is of interest for its style as well as its content. The selections follow a roughly chronological order and are divided into broad thematic groups including 'First Impressions of Australia', 'Aboriginal Encounters', 'Traveling', 'Friends, Lovers, Sexual Commerce', 'Rituals and Celebrations' and 'Protest and Revolution'. These headings provide an initial point of entry for the general reader, while an alternative contents list, organised by genre, permit comparisons between similar kinds of writing by very different kinds of people: letters, for example, by Elizabeth Macarthur and Ned Kelly; or the journalism of Marcus Clarke and Louisa Lawson.

Since this is the first anthology of its kind, Elizabeth Webby has sought to combine the well-known with the little-known, both in terms of the writers and the extracts chosen. In the selection of 'Historical, Descriptive and Travel Writing', for example, the French traveller Edmond Marin la Meslee's *L'Australie Nouvelle* (1883) has been preferred to the better-known travel works of Anthony Trollope and Mark Twain. While the major explorers are represented — John Oxley, Charles Sturt and Thomas Mitchell — other travel writers such as 'X.Y.Z.' (William Dumaresq), 'Peter 'Possum' (Richard Rowe), Louisa Atkinson and George Bennett display the wide range of styles and interests expressed through this important form of writing. Similar choices enliven the selections of letters, journals and reminiscences, which include not only familiar figures like Elizabeth Macarthur, but others whose letters and diaries have only recently become more readily accessible. These include the diaries of G.T.W.B. Boyes, recently edited by Peter Chapman, and Annie Baxter, soon to be edited by Lucy Frost. A further source of high quality writing is the generous inclusion of items from the periodical press where, as Webby observes, a great deal more research needs to be done, especially on the period after 1850.

The range and assurance of *Colonial Voices* is a result of Elizabeth Webby's extensive research on nineteenth-century Australian literary culture, consolidated in 'Literature and the Reading Public in Australia: 1800-1850', *Early Australian Poetry* (1982), and her numerous articles. Her introduction to *Colonial Voices* is succinct and informative, and written with an awareness of the material specificity of literary production that characterises the well-received 'Production' chapters of the *Penguin New Literary History of Australia*, for which she was nineteenth century editor. Drawing on this research, *Colonial Voices* not only makes accessible a great deal that is already known, but also includes much that is new, like the re-discovery of Cora Ann Weekes:

Cora Ann Weekes was the first woman to edit an Australian magazine, the *Spectator: Journal of Literature and Art*, published in Sydney from July 1858 to January 1859. An Englishwoman, she had edited newspapers in Texas and California before coming to Australia. Her lecture on 'Female Heroism' was probably the first to be given in Australia by a woman.

In addition to brief biographies of the writers, the scholarly apparatus includes an introduction to each thematic section and, at the end of the book, notes on the sources of extracts, the alternative index arranged generically, and a select bibliography. While the design of the book is attractive and functional, following the style of the University of Queensland Press *Australian Authors Series*, the notes on the sources of extracts might have been more immediately helpful if they had appeared as footnotes or end notes to each extract, rather than together at the end of the book where they are difficult to consult when reading the text.

In her introduction, Webby stresses that 'This is, after all, not a revisionist social history, though informed by some that have been written recently, but a literary anthology.' She has, nevertheless, made every effort to include marginalised groups, and her selection and arrangement does indeed testify to the influence of the new approaches to historical and cultural studies that have developed in Australia since the mid 1970s. This is perhaps most apparent in the feminist awareness that quietly informs the selection of material and editorial commentary. The rediscovery of women writers like Cora Ann Weekes helps reverse the masculine bias in received interpretations of the period, while the inclusion of women writers such as Ellen Clacy, Audrey Tennyson, Eliza Brown, Annie Baxter, Louisa Atkinson, Rosa Praed, Louisa Lawson and Catherine Spence reflects the spadework criticism that has been one of the most significant developments in Australian literary studies in recent years.

The influence of these principles is apparent in sections such as 'Friends, Lovers, Sexual Commerce' and 'Rituals and Celebrations'. In reading Marcus Clarke's essay 'Melbourne Streets at Night' (1868), J.E. Neild's review of *A Doll's House* (1889) or the extracts from the diary of A.G. Stephens (1896), it is difficult not to acknowledge the argument of feminist historian Marilyn Lake that one of the key issues of the period is the contest between men and women for control of the national culture. The connection between gender and cultural agency becomes clear in the extracts from the diary of Melbourne editor and critic James Smith, where discussions about the founding of a new literary journal jostle with stories of colleagues misbehaving in brothels:

After dinner our conversation happened to turn upon the sensual extravagancies of Martley . . . On one occasion . . . he gave the wretched inmate of one of those houses, situated in a right of way off Bourke Street, a cheque, which was dishonoured. The women of the house took away his clothes, & he was a prisoner for two or three days, until a brother barrister sent him a suit & released him.

Material of this kind can provide startling insights into the politics of representation when it is read alongside women's writing of the same period, and this is precisely what Webby's excellent arrangement of the extracts allows us to do. Neild's moralistic review of *A Doll's House* and the romantic idealism of David Blair's letter of proposal to his 'Beau Ideal', Annie Grant, are both affected by the deconstructive gaze of Louisa Lawson ridiculing men who set themselves up as authorities on the character and morality of women:

'No, I don't run men down, but I run down their vanity — especially when they're talking and writing about women. A man editing a ladies paper! Or talking about a woman's question in Parliament! I don't know whether to laugh or cry: they know so little about us. We see it. Oh, why don't women laugh right out.'

Another example of Webby's considered yet unobtrusive editing is the juxtaposition of Cora Ann Weekes' lecture on 'Female Heroism in the Nineteenth Century', with its compassionate remarks on women's attempts to establish 'Female Hospitals' and 'Magdalen Retreats' — 'Thus it is . . . that we find woman's beneficent influence permeating and pervading, like an atmosphere of light and fragrance, all climes, all countries . . . ' — with Dan Deniehy's invoking of the Victorian myth of the fallen woman in his essay on 'The Social Evil' (1859): 'All the preaching since the days of Him who dealt mercy to the woman taken in adultery never brought back an erring female to the forsaken path.'

It is one of the ironies of this section that Louisa Lawson is introduced by A.G. Stephens: 'And now Mrs Lawson may speak a little space for herself'. But when she does, Louisa disposes of the myth of

female subjection. One of the most memorable images in the anthology concerns precisely the matter of women's cultural agency and their ability to speak within and against a masculine literary culture. Recalling the difficulties of learning to set type in the early days of the *Dawn*, Louisa remembers the visit of a man from another journal who stood laughing at the efforts of her staff:

'Well, he stood there and said nasty things and poor Miss Greig — she was my forewoman — and the girls, they got as white as chalk: the tears were in their eyes. I asked him three times to go, and he wouldn't, so I took up a watering-pot full of water that we had for sweeping the floor, and I let him have it.'

Despite the constraint that 'the most memorable nineteenth century Australian writers were from a middle or upper class English background', the selection of material also illustrates the often violent and destructive conflicts associated with racial and class differences that pervade so much of the history of nineteenth-century Australia. The section 'Aboriginal Encounters' is specifically concerned with encounters between Aboriginal people and the white invaders of their territory. Examples range from the sympathetic response of Watkin Tench to Thomas Mitchell's important journal of *Three Expeditions into the Interior of Eastern Australia* (1859), where the physical violence of his travels is repeated in the act of discursive representation.

The material included under 'Protest and Revolution' provides a sobering antidote to celebratory accounts of the colonial period emerging during the bicentennial year. Extracts from J.D. Lang, Dan Deniehy, Raffaello Carboni and Ned Kelly's Jerilderie letter touch on most of the key political movements of the century. And one result of reading this material is to realise the clear continuities that exist between the Australia of the nineteenth century and the present, as in William Lane's plea for 'One-Man-One-Vote', published in the Brisbane newspaper the *Worker* on 13 June 1891:

Here in Queensland, as in other parts of the world, we have found out that our noses are ringed by gross electoral inequalities; here, a small minority . . . have hold of the legislative rope with which they haul us about as much as they like. One-man-one-vote means equal voice in law-making for all men, thereby giving the men of Queensland opportunity to be the rulers of Queensland and effectively snapping the ring-in-the-nose wherewith the propertied classes now control us for their own selfish purposes.

Charles Harpur is a surprising absence from 'Protest and Revolution': although his personal correspondence with Henry Parkes is represented elsewhere in the collection, his political prose — on the need

for land reform, democratic representation and Australian cultural independence — is also well worth reprinting.

The pervasive sense of conflict and struggle in nineteenth century cultural history is seen not only in the deliberate inclusion of such material, but also in the discovery of class conflict in places where we might least expect to see it. Elizabeth Webby's selection and presentation of material is especially sensitive here — as seen, for example, in her telling juxtaposition of G.T.W.B. Boyes' rhapsodic description of Mount Wellington with his level-headed account of convict sufferings at New Norfolk. As Webby observes, 'A modern reader may have some difficulty coming to terms with a sensibility like Boyes', which can enthuse over the natural sublime one minute and the next record in graphic detail the horrors of a penal station (and congratulate himself on being the first to do so).'

Elizabeth Webby's *Colonial Voices* will stimulate further teaching and research in nineteenth-century Australian literary culture which, until recently, has been hampered, especially at the undergraduate level, by the unavailability of texts. Both here and in Europe, the United States and Canada, where interest in the Australian nineteenth century is growing, *Colonial Voices* will serve as the Norton Anthology has to early American writing.

Despite its catholicity of taste, *Colonial Voices* is, of its very nature, an inescapably revisionist project. As Ken Stewart has remarked, the very act of research and retrieval is in effect revisionist in so far as it redraws the map of Australian literary history, and opens up new areas of research and interpretation. *Colonial Voices* is an important contribution to the growing field of nineteenth century studies by one of its most respected scholars.