

**Michael Wilding. *Wild Bleak Bohemia: Marcus Clarke, Adam Lindsay Gordon and Henry Kendall. A Documentary.* Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2014. 580 pp. AU\$39.95
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The first thing one notices about *Wild Bleak Bohemia* is its size. The second is its subtitle. What does the term ‘documentary’ mean when used to describe a book? For Michael Wilding, it seems, the reproduction of all the documents he could find relating to the lives and literary careers of the three writers he deals with, arranged more or less chronologically with little in the way of discussion or analysis.

As the list of his previous publications shows, Wilding has been an amazingly prolific producer of both fictional and scholarly works. The list, which includes 24 works of fiction and nine of non-fiction, besides numerous edited books, begins with the titles of two previous books also classed as documentaries, one on William Lane and his failed attempt to establish a settlement in Paraguay, the other on Dr. John Dee, an Elizabethan alchemist. I am not sure, however, whether this means that they took the same approach to their historical material as this new work does. Indeed, in the bibliography of Wilding’s publications included in *Running Wild: Essays, Fictions and Memoirs Presented to Michael Wilding* (2004), *The Paraguayan Experiment* is classed as fiction.

The last 35 or so pages of *Wild Bleak Bohemia* list the sources Wilding has drawn on in compiling it: manuscripts, books and articles dating both from the time of his three authors and later, plus many items published in nineteenth-century newspapers and magazines. While Trove has made searching their thousands of columns of small print much easier, this still represents an enormous amount of archival work by Wilding. True, he has been at it for a long time in the case of Gordon and Clarke. One of the first essays he wrote after arriving at Sydney University early in the 1960s, published in *Southerly* in 1965, was on ‘Adam Lindsay Gordon in England: The Legend of the Steeplechase.’ Wilding had attended the same English school as Gordon, but seems to have identified more closely with Clarke as both a fiction writer and a more thoroughgoing Bohemian. His list of sources includes thirteen previous publications by him on Clarke, as against the one on Gordon, together with the much more recent ‘What do Poets Drink?’ on Clarke, Gordon and Kendall, published in *Quadrant* in 2011.

For me, the most interesting section of *Wild Bleak Bohemia* relates to the composition of Clarke’s now famous preface to Adam Lindsay Gordon’s *Sea Spray and Smoke Drift* (1876). It has long been known that Clarke recycled some of this from an earlier publication, *Photographs of Pictures in the National Gallery, Melbourne* (1875). But Wilding shows that other sections of the preface had come from a column entitled ‘Country Leisure’ published in the *Queenslander* on 4 September 1875. It was here that Clarke first used that memorable phrase ‘Weird Melancholy’ to describe ‘the dominant note of Australian scenery.’ Wilding also suggests that Clarke might have originally had Kendall’s much gloomier poetry in mind when he first wrote these lines, rather than Gordon’s.

With respect to the well-known stories of the disastrous lives of Clarke, Gordon and Kendall, all of whom died poor and relatively young, Wilding does not have a great deal to add. He does make one interesting suggestion regarding Gordon, who was apparently a reticent man

with little in the way of small talk, something viewed by some at the time as a sign of his English snobbishness. Wilding, however, thinks that this ‘snobbishness might now be diagnosed as the lack of social skills characteristic of Asperger’s syndrome, evidenced in Gordon’s phenomenal memory’ (176).

Unlike Clarke and Kendall, Gordon was apparently not a heavy drinker and not often to be found in Melbourne’s Bohemian haunts such as the Yorick Club. Nor did he really attempt to make a living through journalism as Clarke and Kendall did. So one might question whether he deserves to be classed as a bohemian, apart from having a love of literature and a poor head for business. For a few years before Gordon’s death in 1870, however, all three writers were in Melbourne, the place Kendall was later to refer to as ‘that wild bleak Bohemia south of the Murray,’ although both he and Gordon spent more time in NSW and South Australia respectively.

While Wilding records all the significant details of each writer’s life, the main focus of his book is on Melbourne in the 1860s and 70s, the prosperous decades after the gold rushes when it was undoubtedly the journalistic and literary capital of Australia. There is much here about the circle in which Clarke in particular moved, chiefly made up of writers and journalists, though many from other professions were also members of the Yorick Club. Wilding quotes extensively from the diaries kept by John Buckley Castieau, who in 1869 became the governor of Melbourne gaol, for example. As with all the others associated in any way with Gordon, Clarke or Kendall, we are given a brief summary of his background. And the fact that Gordon knew Julian Tenison-Woods means that even Mary MacKillop makes it into the story, and we get a lengthy account of his letters to her about his nightly struggles with devils.

There is, then, plenty of fascinating information here, especially for those wanting to know more about the cultural life of Melbourne in the second half of the nineteenth century and the difficulties faced by even the most talented of our earlier writers. Unfortunately, *Wild Bleak Bohemia* does not have an index—it does not even have chapters—so does not easily lend itself to a search for information on a particular person, event or year. And as is usual these days, poor proofreading means there are many typographical errors along with the usual misspellings, such as Mahoney. So anyone wishing to quote from any of the documents Wilding transcribes would do well to check the original.

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