

**Elizabeth Morrison. *A Man of No Mean Talent: Donald Cameron and Australian Colonial Newspaper Fiction*. Restitution Publishing, 2023. 152 pages. ISBN 0646883119; 9780646883113. For purchase contact E. Morrison, PO Box 410 Queanbeyan 2620.**

In *The Reading Nation of the Romantic Period*, William St Clair described most literary history as “a parade of great names described from a commentator’s box set high above the marching column,” or “the open parliament with all the members participating and listening.” Instead of following these models based on arbitrary selections from modern points-of-view, St Clair urges researchers to investigate the literature that most people actually read. While Elizabeth Morrison might not have directly followed this advice, her book on the life and work of Donald Cameron draws attention to the pages actually read by many Australians, providing her reader with a relatively unknown and unique view of colonial literary production, one that demonstrates how much more there is to know when we look beyond the “parade of great names.”

Cameron’s position in Australian literary history has been precariously maintained through occasional interest in his sensational novel, *Mysteries of Melbourne Life* (1874), but Morrison looks beyond this publication to find an editing and writing career that made a significant impact on the ways in which Australian fiction was printed and distributed in the late nineteenth century. The travails of Cameron’s writing and editing career are brought to life through Morrison’s persistent archival research and the bibliographical detail deployed throughout the book and further recorded in a series of useful appendices.

After establishing Cameron’s family origins and early life, Morrison devotes three chapters to the decade in which Cameron’s career was established and then precariously maintained through several stages. These chapters are valuable for the ways in which they trace the movements of this journalist and aspiring writer from the streets of Melbourne to the goldfields of Bendigo. Like many Australian writers, Cameron reached his first readers through the pages of Melbourne’s *Australian Journal*, indicating his skills in producing both short and long fiction for readers of a popular magazine. Publishing success did not translate into commercial success (if he was paid at all), and so Cameron’s decision to become a journalist for the *Bendigo Advertiser* aligned him with many aspiring writers who survived by means of careers in journalism. The publishing conditions and opportunities for writers of fiction in Australia were primarily centred on newspapers and magazines in the nineteenth century, but that didn’t stop the entrepreneurial Cameron from self-publishing several novel-length stories in Melbourne, including *Mysteries of Melbourne Life*, his best-known work. Despite the success of the latter, Cameron persevered as a journalist and editor for several years before a short stint as a politician delayed but did not derail his literary endeavours.

Cameron’s entrepreneurial instincts combined with his authorial and editorial skills to contribute to the establishment of a little-known method of publishing that Morrison brings to the foreground of Australian literary and print culture history. Joining several partners in a decade of production from the late 1870s, Cameron was instrumental in the establishment, production and distribution of a newspaper supplement that took syndicated Australian and imported fiction to rural localities across Australia. Printed in Melbourne and then shipped to country newspapers in many rural areas, this form of publication adds an alternative to the better-known newspaper, magazine, and book formats. Morrison provides detailed commentary on the rise of the supplement. The work of many Australian and overseas authors appeared in these supplements (usefully recorded in several appendices), including that of Donald Cameron, whose personal behaviour seems to have impeded his literary aspirations. A number of his novels were published in the supplements, but Morrison reveals the difficulties

of maintaining the venture, giving evidence of insolvency and reports of anti-social behaviour that inevitably drove Cameron from Melbourne to become editor of the *Riverine Grazier* in Hay, NSW, a position he held with some dignity until his death in 1888.

Much more than a biography of a colonial writer who walked the same streets as Marcus Clarke, this book provides a significant contribution to knowledge of the production, publication, and distribution of Australian fiction and non-fiction in the late nineteenth century. Donald Cameron's career as a journalist and writer of short stories and serialised fiction, along with his entrepreneurial drive to establish a supplement for syndicated fiction, provide a rich example of authorship and publishing to go beside better-known colonial writers and forms of publication. Morrison's *A Man of No Mean Talent* should be consulted by anybody researching the histories of authorship, reading, and publishing in colonial Australia.

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