

Peter Kirkpatrick. *The Sea Coast of Bohemia: Literary Life in Sydney's Roaring Twenties.* Australian Scholarly Classics. Perth: API Network, 2007, 324+viii pp.

AU\$34.95

ISBN: 9781920845292

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You can't take them all with you. No, you face some difficult decisions about your book collection when taking up a new post at the other end of the earth: what to take; what to leave in storage; what to give away; what to sell. And in the inevitable last-minute rush to have it all sorted before the removalists arrive, there's little time to linger over the decision-making. Executions are carried out the old-fashioned way—immediately after a very short trial—and with no chance of appeal or reprieve.

But even if more time *had* been available, I wouldn't have wasted much of it on long deliberation over whether to take with me my copy of the original 1992 edition of Peter Kirkpatrick's *The Sea Coast of Bohemia*, with its colourfully clad and masked woman setting off the mainly bright yellow cover, the trail of smoke from her cigarette combining with that billowing from the chimneys of a ferry as it passes in front of the Harbour Bridge. At most, I might have hesitated to arrange for its shipment to London if I'd known this handsome new and revised edition was on the way, published as part of the Australian Public Intellectual (API) Network's Australian Scholarly Classics series, which aims to bring back into print major Australian scholarly works. It was a book that I recall having read with enormous pleasure a few years after it first appeared, and one to which I'd since returned from time to time, depending on what I happened to be teaching or writing—most recently, to remind myself of what Kirkpatrick had said about the era's most extraordinary *femme fatale*, Anne Brennan.

My reading of *this* edition has reminded me of just how good a book it is. Yet as a text that many critics would rightly regard as a model cultural history, I also couldn't help re-considering it, in a way that I wouldn't have done first time round, in light of the debates that have swirled around Australian public culture in recent years concerning the role of narrative in historical writing; a matter that is now apparently of such importance that it can provoke a long-serving Liberal prime minister into regular (and tedious) speechifying. In a new Introduction, Kirkpatrick is characteristically sensible on this subject: 'in a popular cultural history such as this there will always be a conflict between narrative imperatives—the need to spin a moderately good yarn—and the

urge to pause and speculate about what it all means' (4). The author, I think, strikes this balance beautifully. He *does* have an argument—a 'thesis', if you like (and the book did have its origins in a doctoral dissertation)—which is that 'for all its rejection of Capitalism, Bohemia inevitably exists in a reciprocal or symbiotic relationship with bourgeois society as its mirror, since each is sustained by an underlying belief in the virtues of heroic individualism' (3). The book *does* illustrate this case in an understated sort of way, and in this sense it performs one of the 'tasks' of the scholarly work.

It's not, however, the book's arguments about capitalism or individualism that remain with you once you close it and put it away. *The Sea Coast of Bohemia* is memorable because of its evocation of personality, time and place; for its striking images and stories; and for its loving act of historical recovery. As Kirkpatrick explains in the introduction, 'I wanted to tell as many people as possible about the extraordinary things I'd uncovered or been told about, and to remind Sydneysiders, in particular, of a forgotten part of their cultural heritage' (4). Happily, this sense of wonderment has survived into the revised edition. The author, since the early 1990s, has 'become aware of how the book might have been intellectually enhanced by reference to the work of Pierre Bourdieu on cultural capital and the structural relationships between what he calls the field of cultural production and the field of power' (5). I'm glad that Kirkpatrick resisted the temptation to add Bourdieu and 'a pantheon of theorists' (6-7) to his study; I'd much rather read about Dulcie Deamer performing the splits, Anne Brennan kicking up her heels on the tabletop at the Café la Bohème, or even the nonsense spouted by Sam Rosa while presiding over the Noble Order of I Felici, Litterati, Conoscenti e Lunatici in the same establishment.

Kirkpatrick's strength lies in his ability to contextualise the striking image, the amusing tale and the individual life-story so that they open up a larger set of meanings and insights. This isn't a collection of anecdotes, or disconnected biographical portraits; nor is it the kind of grand narrative that wins a Prime Minister's Prize for History. It's rather a book on a subject that, at almost every point, appears as if at any moment it will fragment into bits and pieces, pretty jewels that can be admired for themselves but which form no pattern as they sit gathering dust in the bottom drawer of Grandma's bedside cabinet. But this fate is avoided through Kirkpatrick's virtuosity in bringing it all together, his ingeniousness in connecting and making into coherent history such a diverse range of cultural materials: from Norman Lindsay's Olympian pronouncements on the role of the artist as hero from his lofty Springwood mountaintop to the juvenile pub antics of the journalists and black-and-white

artists from *Smith's Weekly* and the *Bulletin*, through to the revelry of Sydney's Artists' Balls in the 1920s and the self-conscious absurdities of bohemian ritual in a string of cheap restaurants and cafes.

It's really Sydney that holds this book together, not any thesis on bohemia, nor any literary theory or model. Bourdieu would not have been able to offer much help here, and nor was he needed. Kirkpatrick's love of the city carries this book from beginning to end. Sydney is the star of this show, not Deamer, not Anne Brennan and certainly not some conceited artistic 'refugee' from the moral straighteners of Creswick in the Victorian goldfields.

There's much that's familiar in Kirkpatrick's portrait of Sydney. Anne Brennan's husband was mauled by a shark: as any reader of what the British press says about Australia will know, there could be no more 'Sydney' ending than that, and perhaps nothing more 'Australian', unless it be to meet one's end by drowning in a billabong. And I love the way Kirkpatrick deals ever so briefly in one of the early chapters with Melbourne's rather more dour version of early-twentieth century bohemianism, almost as if to provide a slightly dull and dowdy curtain-raiser to the main event, one in which some glamorous Jazz Age beauty will be revealed in all her glory. Similarly, later in the century, the reputation and probably reality of Melbourne's bohemian 'Drift' would never seriously rival the extraordinary accretion of myth and legend that attached to Sydney's much more famous 'Push'.

There's a sensuousness that is as evident in Kirkpatrick's portrayal of the pubs, cafes and squalid bedsits, as in his description of that much more familiar image of the city, its stunning Harbour. And the book is beautifully framed by the life and death (by drowning after falling—or more likely jumping—from a Sydney Harbour Ferry; another very Sydney ending) of Joe Lynch, the artist made immortal in Kenneth Slessor's 'Five Bells', but also the 'face' in a sculpture of a satyr by his brother Guy, now in Sydney's Botanic Gardens. The sculpture illustrates one of Kirkpatrick's themes—the way in which Sydney intellectuals, writers and artists of the 1920s sought to attach a classical iconography to a city they imagined as an Arcadia.

But if there is much love and joy in Kirkpatrick's portrait of a city and its literary and artistic life in the twenties, tragedy is never far away. How could it not be? For as Kirkpatrick reminds us, Bohemia (in the sense used in this book) isn't a real place, but an ideal, a 'place' invented in the effort to escape from the mundane realities of modern life, even while actually having to compromise with them. *The Sea Coast of Bohemia* is vivid in its presentation of two deeply troubled family connections—those between Christopher and

his daughter, Anne Brennan, and Norman and his son, Jack Lindsay. The complexities of each relationship are examined not merely for their personal aspects—and they would be of interest as social history even if Kirkpatrick had done no more—but for how they help to epitomise some aspect of the cultural life of Sydney in the Jazz Age: for instance, the dominant personalities of these ‘big men’ of art and letters, and the fraught experience of discipleship crossed with filial loyalty (in Jack’s case), and of intense personal attachment, combined with fierce rebellion against *some* gender norms—while faithfully observing others (in Anne’s).

This is a book that crosses boundaries: between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, ‘journalism’ and ‘literature’, art as life and life as art. Many of the personalities, and several of the writers, would have no place in a more canonical approach to the study of Australian literature. And although Kirkpatrick is too old-fashioned a scholar to embrace a postmodernism that suspends aesthetic judgment and collapses orthodox categories as if they were devoid of meaning or usefulness, the effect of this splendid cultural history is to remind us of the instability and provisional character of any such judgments. Kirkpatrick devotes a part of one chapter, for instance, to Les Robinson, who often lived in caves in Middle Harbour, and produced surreal stories that place ‘him way outside any Australian realist tradition in fiction’ (234). But his work has recently appeared in an Angus & Robertson series of reprints that includes the decidedly canonical Henry Lawson, Miles Franklin, Kylie Tennant and Thomas Keneally. Other writers examined here, such as Geoffrey Cumine and Hugh McKay, have largely passed outside of the vision of Australian literary criticism and history, but Cumine, in particular, in the subject of a deeply affectionate and memorable account in the *Sea Coast of Bohemia*. No reader of this book will quickly forget the delicious image of the great bulk of Christopher Brennan, stumbling along the street with the one-armed, ear-ringed Gallipoli veteran, Cumine, both men ‘in their cups [. . .] a lost-looking tugboat with an ocean liner in tow searching for moorings’ (232).

It’s a fitting image on which to end a review of this book. Brennan *does* have a place in the Australian literary canon, yet it remains an uncertain one, and there has been ongoing debate about where he belongs. Early modernist, late-Victorian, or both? In a sense he is still, posthumously, searching for moorings. Meanwhile, Cumine—his drinking partner for the evening—is a largely forgotten figure whose reputation has never been sufficiently substantial to warrant moorings at all; a minor poet for sure, and yet:

[. . .] I have what no wealth can buy—
I dare to call my soul my own. (234)

The famous and forgotten all come together over a generously endowed claret-cup in *The Sea Coast of Bohemia*.

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