

W. F. Refshauge. *Searching for the Man from Snowy River*. Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2013, 223pp.

ISBN: 9781 9218 75571

AU\$ 39.95

<http://www.scholarly.info/book/299/>

Searching for the Man from Snowy River is, as the title suggests, an examination of whether ‘the man’ in Banjo Paterson’s famous poem may have been a real individual and, if so, his likely identity. ‘The Man from Snowy River’, first published in the *Bulletin* on 26 April 1890, was an immediate success and has remained so, capturing something essential, not only about the Australian landscape, but also to the Australian psyche. The poem plainly resonated in popular culture and for this reason the text warrants some examination of whether there are any historical facts to which it might be tethered.

‘The Man from Snowy River’ is the story of the prevailing of an underdog, and it is written in the compelling, lively verse for which Paterson became renowned. Whereas insofar as ‘Clancy of the Overflow’ was concerned, Paterson confirmed late in life that there was an actual event and a person behind that poem, no such confirmation was given with regards to ‘The Man from Snowy River’, thus it is both the fact of whether such a man existed and his possible identity that is in issue in Refshauge’s investigation.

The book begins with an examination of the text of the poem itself, comparing the original published version to the later edition published in manuscript form and extracting the critical factual information from the verse that might be verified and used to identify the man. Refshauge begins with the ‘colt from old Regret’ (13) which, had one existed, might have been a piece of information that might assist in identifying the man. However, whilst there was a thoroughbred brood mare Regret, there was not one colt produced by her. This initial investigation establishes a pattern for the rest of the book, in which Refshauge sets himself the task of pursuing or eliminating every piece of information that could possibly assist in identifying the man. The words used by Paterson are scrupulously examined for any hint as to the man’s identity; Refshauge deduces, for example, from the words ‘He hails from Snowy River’ that the man is not from the Snowy River, but rather the district known as ‘Snowy River’, being the area ‘south from Kiandra, encompassing Jindabyne and Adaminaby’ (18). Refshauge makes much of Paterson’s description of the man’s horse riding skills which are,

of course, given such prominence in the poem itself and which are one of the key criteria used to establish the man's identity.

Refshauge also examines Paterson's own life, in an effort to distinguish between information the poet might have gleaned from his own personal experience and that which might have been taken from the man if one existed. Paterson's own life leading up to the writing of the poem is given a great deal of attention particularly insofar as what might have been at the forefront in Paterson's mind at the time he wrote the work.

Since Paterson himself did not give any concrete indication about whether a man existed (although the indications that were given seem to tip in favour of the view that there was no man), the test Refshauge uses to determine whether or not there was a man is whether the information in the poem can be tethered to an actual, known person. Refshauge concedes the possibility that no such man existed, but sets himself the task of finding such a man if one is identifiable. The three key criteria he uses are: that the man should be a legal minor in order to 'qualify as "stripling"' (88), but no younger than seventeen; that he display considerable horsemanship abilities; and that he come from Snowy River.

The final chapters of the book are devoted to applying these criteria to men who might be identified as the man. Refshauge uses these criteria to eliminate Jack Riley from contention: the man who had been best known as the man from Snowy River to date and identified as such on his grave. The most compelling reason offered as the reason why Jack Riley could not have been the man are the deficiencies in Riley's horsemanship skills. Refshauge also examines a number of other candidates, including whether the man was an oblique reference to Paterson himself and whether the man might have been indigenous, though there is little basis in the text to draw this inference and, it seems to me, the poem itself would be a work of an entirely different character had this been the case.

The candidate to whom Refshauge gives most credence to is Charles McKeahnie; principally Refshauge uses the ride described in a poem by Barcroft Boake, of an unusual chase he made after a valuable horse in which McKeahnie chased a 'locally known brumby stallion over a distance of perhaps fifteen miles until the brumby panicked, missed its footing and died in the resulting smash (140-141).' Charles McKeahnie meets Refshauge's three criteria of being

twenty years old at the time of the chase, hailing from the Snowy River and being an expert horseman as attested to by the Boake poem.

The examination of McKeahnie is given attention in the last chapters of the book. First the chase described by Boake's poem is examined for whether it matches up to Paterson's poem and Refshauge is surprised by the consistency. However, ultimately Refshauge's findings in relation to McKeahnie remain provisional and the author concedes, although he makes a compelling case for McKeahnie being the man, he is unable to prove it is so. Although, in some ways, for the purpose of the book, we might want a more emphatic conclusion, ultimately it speaks to how rigorously Refshauge has applied his own criteria about the man's identity that he does not provide an unconvincing answer to the question he has raised.

Refshauge's research is meticulous and, had there been a man, I have no doubt Refshauge would have found a way of pinpointing him and matching him with the poem's biographical details. The only thing missing from the book is an examination of why the man's identity bears any significance to the reading of the text. Would the knowledge that the man is, in fact, McKeahnie make the poem a somehow more compelling read? Or would it increase the value of the poem as a literary work? These are matters that Refshauge leaves unexplored.

Nonetheless, *Searching for the Man from Snowy River* is a detailed and admirable effort at examining the factual underpinnings of an important work of Australian verse. It is a book that makes Refshauge's passion for his subject clear.

Gretchen Shirm, University of Western Sydney