
When Russell Braddon, still haunted by his Burma Railway privations, found post-war existence unbearable, he tried to kill himself with a spectacular dosage of phenobarbitone. Discovered in a comatose state at his university college, he was taken to hospital, pumped clean, transferred to a ward with bars on the windows, and subjected to five months of disagreeable therapy. It involved the incessant weaving of scarves, shambling through the corridors in pyjamas with the cord removed, and repeated warnings that electro-convulsive therapy would be the automatic punishment for disobeying orders.

So Braddon, scion of an establishment family (two Tasmanian electorates and a Canberra suburb carry the name), devised his own cure. He would go Home – with a capital ‘H’ as Australians styled it in 1949 – to England, and become a writer. On his signed promise that he would not attempt suicide again, Concord Repatriation Hospital released him. He drew his accumulated army pay out of the bank, bought a first-class starboard berth on the Orontes, and sailed away to a remarkable metamorphosis: despairing ex-POW into author of international acclaim. His second book, a war memoir written early in a spell at ‘Home’ that would last more than forty years, sold two million copies.

Russell Braddon’s relocation, and his subsequent success, becomes one of the final acts of the literary diaspora covered by Peter Morton in *Lusting for London: Australian Expatriate Writers at the Hub of Empire, 1870-1950*. The book’s ambitious scope echoes the shared determination of its 150 subjects; it is a work of exhaustive scholarship and considerable dimension. Nevertheless, a certain fissure intrudes upon the nexus between Morton’s objective and the lives he describes. For while many of those existences ended in poverty and desolation (even, in one instance, as a workhouse inmate), Morton himself remains uncompromisingly triumphant.

This is a book of prodigious achievement; there is an entire conference in its revelations. The reader encounters a cast of extraordinary expatriates. Among their number are Reginald Carrington (‘no talent’ and ‘a hopeless dilettante’ [109], according to Morton), who fails utterly at journalism and invents a ghastly board game called ‘Blackfellow’, where policemen-tokens pursue an Aborigine; Chester Cobb, who blows his inheritance by going ‘Home’ to write ‘experimental fiction’ and turns instead to chicken farming (113); and William Nicholas Willis, co-founder of the newspaper *Truth*, who makes his London living by spicing up the short stories of Guy de Maupassant. The most extraordinary of the lot was the medical journalist and ‘popular sexologist’ Dr Norman Haire (66), who notoriously once asked a socialite of his acquaintance if she had tried sex with animals. When she reacted with displeasure, he had replied: ‘Why not? They say you can train a peke to do anything’ (66). These characters come back to life on the pages of *Lusting for London* through the author’s incisive research, pursued – surely – through some expatriation of his own to the stacks and the desks of the British Library at St Pancras. His aim, he declares at the outset, is to investigate ‘a phenomenon that has been one of the most identifiable and enduring themes in the socio-economics of Australian letters’ (2).

In satisfying that quest, Morton relates biographies in miniature. Prominent within this feature of the narrative is the story of Philip Lindsay: his London sojourn begins in the doss-house under St Martin’s-in-the-Fields, then offers a flicker of promise with film scripts...
and a fee for technical advice on Korda’s *The Private Life of Henry VIII*. But self-destructive behaviour ‘on an heroic scale’ sees him evicted from his rented cottage, where he had failed to pay the rent, urinated from a window, and outraged the landlord by associating with ‘a set of undesirable and drunken companions’ (93). He wrote on (and drank on), nevertheless, dying in 1958 aged fifty-two. He had remained capable, says Morton, of ‘writing 10,000 words in a day’ despite ‘the squalor, the illnesses, the benders, and the bailiffs’ (95).

The life of Louise Mack, for whom Morton’s warm portrait suggests a little delayed lusting of his own, is rich in the courage and self-belief required of the intending *arriviste*. This ‘pretty, vivacious’ writer found the ‘Street of Adventure’ hostile at first, in the winter of 1901-02 after her erstwhile popularity as a ‘cosseted contributor’ at *The Bulletin* in Sydney (124). The plaintive tone of her memoir *An Australian Girl in London* tells its reader: ‘Office upon office looks down on you. … They steal from you all your need for battle. They dissipate your will. They weaken your intention. They convince you of your own unimportance’ (124).

Mack grew profoundly depressed in her Bloomsbury attic, but continued to knock on editors’ doors, finding work with Harmsworth Press and for W.T. Stead (the pioneer of investigative journalism), displaying courage too as a war correspondent in the siege of Antwerp. That brush with combat was sufficient to justify a lecture tour of Australia in 1915 – which, in turn, led to her celebrity endorsement of Rexona soap for its supposed role in preserving her peach-bloom complexion ‘during those difficult days in the trenches’ (127). In addition to the colour and the anecdotes, Morton embellishes his text with extended reflections on the nature of expatriation as expressed in novel form by Martin Boyd, Henry Handel Richardson, and Christina Stead. Life and art, in a variant on Oscar Wilde’s *bon mot*, are shown to imitate each other in those chapters accordingly.

The one disappointment within the covers of *Lusting for London* is that there are no illustrations. One does so want to see Louise Mack and Philip Lindsay and even Dr Norman Haire (although posing perhaps without a pet Pekingese).

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