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The Wayward Tourist: Mark Twain's Adventures in Australia. Introduction by Don Watson. (MUP, 2006).

Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers Radio, Radio Adelaide, Recorded 17 November 2006.

In 1895, Mark Twain embarked on a lecture tour of the British Colonies, first stop Australia. *The Wayward Tourist* is an edited extract from the 1897 book which resulted, *Following the Equator*, and covers the Australian section of the journey.

While I was reading *The Wayward Tourist* I happened to see Robert Altman's film *A Prairie Home Companion*, featuring the ultra-dry wit of Garrison Keillor, who can have an audience in stitches without breaking into a smile. It's clear that Keillor, like many American humourists, owes a lot to Mark Twain, who believed that the trick to telling a funny story was to 'conceal the fact that he even dimly suspects that there is anything funny about it.'

The Wayward Tourist is peppered with funny observations and unlikely stories, but it also covers some pretty serious territory. Mark Twain's take on the battle between indigenous and white Australia would find little favour today, but he nevertheless displays an unsentimental sympathy for the Aborigines (or Savages, as he calls them), and a respect for them as a resourceful and formidable enemy to the civilisation he (like most others of the time) assumed would eventually prevail and eliminate them forever. It was all based on second-hand information, though. He travelled from Sydney to Melbourne to Adelaide, then back to Victoria, all by train, and never laid eyes on a single indigenous Australian.

Many of the stories related in the book are improbable. In his introduction, Don Watson expresses some surprise that Mark Twain fell for 'such preposterous bait', commenting that 'whatever it felt like then, to have made a fool of Mark Twain does not now inspire feelings of patriotic pride'. I would have said, however, that

Twain didn't object to a tall story, and knew that strict truthfulness and entertainment are not always comfortable companions. He certainly felt no compulsion to stick to the topic in hand. There is a whole chapter quoting a discussion between a Christian missionary in India and a 'good old Hindoo gentleman', on the comparative superiority of their religions: the only pretext for including it is that he heard about it while in Sydney.

Don Watson has provided a lengthy introduction. Whether Watson is also responsible for the editing isn't revealed. For a book published by Melbourne University Press, it has remarkably little in the way of supporting material. There are exactly seven footnotes, some of which are obviously from the original book, while others seem to have been added for this edition, though it's not always clear. Watson refers in the Introduction to many errors in the original, but there aren't any footnotes in the text to alert the reader to what these might be, or to provide historical explanations or other clarifications which might be helpful from time to time. There is no information about what cuts have been made in the text, or whether the witty chapter epigraphs (all from *Pudd'nhead Wilson's New Calendar*) are an editorial embellishment or were included in the original. Perhaps it was thought that too much scholarly apparatus would spoil the chance of popular success.

The Wayward Tourist is an entertaining and informative view of Australia in the last years before Federation: a place to be admired and enjoyed and wondered at. Mark Twain gives his impressions of the people and the society – his description of an Adelaide Proclamation Day banquet attended by six of the original settlers of 1836 is hilarious – , and the weather and the vegetation of this exotic and extraordinary country. It's always interesting to see an outsider's view of ourselves. Add to this the fascination of the eyewitness account of history, and Mark Twain's readable and engaging prose, and you have a most appealing package despite its editorial shortcomings.