

Walter Murdoch, *On Rabbits, Morality, etc. Selected Writings of Walter Murdoch*, ed. Imre Salusinkszky (UWA Publishing, 2011)

Sir Walter Murdoch was a grand old man of Australian letters. Long before his nephew Keith and great-nephew Rupert made the name Murdoch synonymous with Australian journalism, Walter's enormously popular weekly essays and columns in *The Argus*, *The West Australian* and other newspapers made Murdoch a household name.

His day job was as an academic, as foundation professor of English at the University of Western Australia. Murdoch University is named after one of WA's most outstanding public intellectuals. But over his long life (1874–1970), it was Walter Murdoch's journalistic writings, which began in 1899 and continued right into the early days of *The Australian* in the 1960s, which gave him national standing. Dozens of selections and collections of his essays were published between the World Wars and after, and his biography of Alfred Deakin re-released in 1999. This volume contains a selection from both, plus some 'answers to readers'.

The professor's tone is avuncular; his educated and Presbyterian opinions are the voice of an older Australia. I could imagine Sir Walter and my grandfather yarning over any number of issues. It's illuminating to hear such voices again. In our world, awash with practitioners of creative writing, it comes as a wry pleasure to hear Walter Murdoch's sober admission that has not 'the slightest turn for narrative art, being, I fancy the only scribbler in Australia who has not a manuscript novel up his sleeve'. Maybe things haven't changed that much.

There plenty of 'op ed' pieces kicking around these days; opinion is cheap, I was taught in journalism school. But a lot of it is quickly knocked up to chase the 24-hour news cycle. Sir Walter's essays, as considered and careful writings, have a more enduring quality. They stand somewhere between sermons and blogs, and it seems there is still a healthy appetite for such well-turned short pieces. Black Inc Publishing has been publishing a popular yearbook of the best Australian essays for over a decade now.

This selection is notable for both the essays which speak so strongly of their own time, and for those which are still piquant and relevant. The essay 'On Rabbits, Morality, etc' from which the title is taken, is a caution against excessive pride in our ethics and educated decisions. Murdoch describes the battle to claim the dubious honour of having brought rabbits to Australia. Importing rabbits turned out to be an environmental calamity, but the action was made with the best intentions, indeed, lauded by contemporary society. Future generations, Murdoch points out, may well live to curse our best attempts and our most learned assumptions.

The essay on fear is an exhortation to people who are frightened of innovation, discovery and boldness. Its reproach to the 'cowardice' of those 'who fear the world is going to the dogs' is apt nearly a century after it was written. And then he ticks off 'the elderly' for being the chief carriers of such fear. It would be a brave commentator today who would dare label seniors like that today.

In another essay, Murdoch takes a stab at psychology and fashions in definitions of behaviour, sanity and mental illness. He might have almost written the same essay today on parts of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*.

Book reviews: *On Rabbits, Morality, etc. Selected Writings of Walter Murdoch*, ed. Imre Salusinkszky. Robyn Douglass.

Transnational Literature Vol. 4 no. 2, May 2012.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

But much of the fascination is the essays which describe and advise that older, other Australia. When Murdoch recommends great poets and novelists, his taste in literature emerges as decidedly Victorian, certainly pre-Leavisite. He praises poets I have not even heard of, let alone the ones like Southey that I have heard of but never bothered to read.

In Murdoch's world, tripe and onions are a delicacy; blokes are men and mostly pink at that, but it is not fair to criticise him for being brought up in another era. What is fascinating is how hard he worked at being the voice of reason, of fairness, of decency, in a society still conscious of making itself. In the 1920s and 30s, this was a burgeoning offshoot of the British Empire, and it was a different sort of globalism that Australia encountered. The theme he returns to most often is how to define Australia and Australian-ness.

If Americans are doomed to keep losing and re-discovering their innocence, and the English are endlessly breaking down their class system, perhaps Australians are doomed to keep rediscovering and redefining their national identity. I was surprised to be reminded that we had one in the early twentieth century. This is the Australia we had before multiculturalism, before the 1960s and various social revolutions, before, we are currently led to believe, anything interesting happened. Murdoch returns again and again to what we think of ourselves, what we might be, and almost more importantly, what the rest of the world thinks of us. What's a typical Australian? What can this country contribute to the world?

There is one disappointment with this edition. It has been lightly edited, in that Sir Walter's original spelling and punctuation has been preserved. That's good. But the editing has been a little too light in other ways.

One essay makes reference to 'pale pills for pink people' and I thought I remembered an echo of a popular advertisement. Google, of course, came up with the slogan 'pink pills for pale people', and apparently it was as ubiquitous then as McDonald's golden arches are now, but on first reading, I missed the joke. There might have been others I missed that would have been worth a footnote.

More irritating, there is no date of original publication on any of the essays. It was frustrating to read references to things like 'Signor Mussolini', 'the present financial muddle' or the 'end of the Great War' without having a date to put it into context. When did Mussolini merit an honorific – or was that a snide tone? Was the economic 'muddle' the Great Depression, or just an ordinary recession? Was the Great War still large in memory because World War II was not clearly on the horizon?

There were no dates or sources printed in the original collection and selections, either,¹ so the editor has taken them wholesale. But I found the dates for at least a dozen of the essays as originally published, in the National Library's newspaper archive, www.trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper. It took me just under half an hour. A researcher might have spent a day to give a little more context, which would have made the whole edition more valuable.

¹ For example, in Walter Murdoch, *Collected Essays of Walter Murdoch* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1938); Walter Murdoch, *The Spur of the Moment* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1939); Walter Murdoch, *Speaking Personally* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1946); Walter Murdoch, *Lucid Intervals* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1936).

Overall, it's wonderful to be re-introduced to the voice of popular and educated Australia in the early twentieth century. In the introduction, Murdoch is likened to Clive James in his breadth and erudition, and the comparison is a good one. Australians really do subscribe to a tradition of popular essays. Most importantly, it's worth reading how we grappled to define (European) Australian culture, and find that, surprise, it's been there all the time.

Robyn Douglass