
The book, a collection of essays edited by Rick Hosking and Amit Sarwal, takes its title from the ‘peripatetic bachelor-barrister and writer’ (x) John Lang’s Wanderings in India (1859). Lang was the first Australian born author, who spent his life between Australia, Great Britain and India’ (ix) and is buried in Mussoorie. The book informs us that Anglo-Indian writer Ruskin Bond located Lang’s grave in 1964.

The book is divided into two sections with the longer first section incorporating a number of interesting essays based on myriad ‘encounters and interactions’ between Australia and India. These essays provide perspectives ranging from the historical, literary, political and sporting. The shorter second section contains more reflective and personal pieces including memoirs, reminiscences and travel writing.

The book taps into the occasionally touchy issue of Indo-Australian relations and reflects on issues from an Australian perspective. It is written in response to what Hosking and Sarwal term ‘opportunistic racial attacks on Indian students in Australia’ (xx). The editors emphasise historian Robin Jeffrey’s idea of the present state of Indo-Australian relations being ‘on the cusp of something good, deep, long-standing and mutually beneficial – genuine substance’ (xx).

It is delightful to come across articles such as Christopher Vernon’s essay on shared cityscapes between Australia and India, describing the work of architect Walter Burley Griffin and his equally talented wife Marion Mahony. Some essays provide glimpses into the ever-absorbing topic of cricket; Kama Maclean touches upon it as does Bernard Whimpress. Susan Cowan brings a literary lens to focus on cricket especially citing Dal Stivens’ little known short story ‘The Strange Business at Bombay and Madras’ (1979). Sport, especially cricket, provides a ground for thrashing out conflicted inter-cultural relations and also helps bring out differing attitudes; for instance the good that has come out of cricketer Steve Waugh’s strong and ongoing involvement with certain charities in India (70). His endeavours have earned him the sobriquet ‘Bhaiya’ (brother) which augurs well for such Indo-Australian interactions, showing the capacity of each to give and receive in a spirit of generosity.

Perhaps the most important aspect of this book is that it touches upon the basic lack of awareness of Australia-India connections on part of the general populace of both nations. Therefore, this text addresses the need for both cultures to look at one another as step-sisters with a shared but distinctly different colonial past. In addressing such encounters through a variety of writing styles ranging from creative, reflective to academic, the book does not espouse any particular school of thought; rather it explores Australian-Indian connections from several different angles. David Walker’s essay on ongoing encounters during colonial times stresses the fact that since 1960s Australian knowledge of India is on the decline. Walker’s analysis ties in with Kama Maclean’s essay on the Australian media preoccupation with the voyeuristic picturesque at the Kumbh Mela1 festival. Maclean also discusses an Australia ill-prepared for a powerful

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1 Kumbh Mela: A major yearly Hindu pilgrimage in India where millions of Hindus come together to bathe at the confluence of the three holy rivers, Ganga, Jamuna and Saraswati.

India and regrets the decline of Indian studies within the Australian universities in light of the work done by pioneers such as A.L. Basham in that field.

The essays serve as a cautionary reminder to contemporary Australia against viewing India through an Anglo-centric, colonial lens. Such a note of warning had historically been subtly conveyed by Lang as well as in Mollie Skinner’s tale of the non-stereotypical imperial hero Tucker. The issues of the Australian identity posited against India are examined within the essays, highlighting how colonial Australians viewed themselves as imperial representatives and the fact that even today race issues seem to ‘colour’ the Australian-Indian relationship. Margaret Allen tellingly points out that the Australian Baptist women missionaries used their work in India not only to affirm ‘the gender and race hierarchies of the British Empire’ (48-9) but also as an escape route, a way out of doing missionary work helping the indigenous people at home.

Literature finds strong representation within the text; especially in the portrayal of India in works by Australian women writers who have challenged the norms set up by an exclusively male literary discourse. Alison Bartlett deals with postcolonial literature by Australian writers focusing on India, especially Inez Baranay’s Neem Dreams. Susan Cowan looks at earlier women writers such as Mollie Skinner and Ethel Anderson; focusing on characters such as Skinner’s Tucker who views colonial India through very Australian eyes ‘filled with curiosity and challenging authority’ (140). Cowan highlights the irony inherent in the writings of mid-twentieth century Australian writers such as Christopher Koch who depict the Australian still viewing India dichotomously; partly experiencing a wistful regret at the passing of the Empire (146).

Lisa French discussing Jane Campion’s Holy Smoke in which India is a place for Australians to be different, exploratory, daring and yet escape themselves, echoes Allen’s analysis of nineteenth-century Australian missionaries seeking to ‘Christianise’ Indian women as they seemed to occupy a higher rung in the colonial hierarchy in comparison to indigenous Australian women.

The essays on colonial and contemporary travel shed light on both the Australian traveller and their reception in India. Hosking, Walker, Campbell, Cunningham, Neil and Barz delve into this aspect as participants, observers and analysts. Lang and Hingston as pioneers in this field find frequent mention within the book, including essays devoted exclusively to them. Hingston’s defining the opium trade as ‘this disgraceful traffic’ (110) raises a colonial Australian voice against imperial iniquities.

The aspect of spirituality as a ‘given’ within India culture is seen in Lisa French’s essay as in the abstract Baranay provides of her new novel. Running as a parallel theme to spirituality is that of escape as seen in Allen, French, Neil and Baranay. Jayne Fenton Keane also writing of India as a space to escape a post PhD vacuum relevantly states ‘the tourist creates the experience that creates the tourist’ (199). Maybe in these encounters, both Australians and India create their own version of each other. But pondering more deeply on Christopher Koch’s idea of ‘family closeness’ between Australia and India, based on ‘common roots’ (77), might benefit all in the future.

The book is highly relevant for students working across a variety of disciplines in humanities as well as policy makers of both nations. It also reveals the scope for

another collection of such essays, focusing on Indian wanderings in Australia within a similar time frame, which will provide yet more insight into shared links between the two nations. The most pleasing aspect of the book is the wide range of topics covered. It could have emerged as a heavily academically accented text but instead has been skilfully compiled, making it accessible and appealing to most people with an interest in Australian Indian relations.

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