It came as a surprise to me that *The Profilist* is Adrian Mitchell’s first novel. His name is well known to me as a memoirist and biographer, but clearly something about the life of colonial artist Samuel Thomas Gill made him decide to turn to fiction.

That something might just be the sketchiness of the biographical information available. As Mitchell says in his preface, titled ‘An admission or two’, ‘in Gill’s case, the pictures are pretty much all we have to go on’, but he boldly asserts that ‘the essence of Gill’s record is here’, despite some ‘mere details’ which might offend the purists. The facts are one thing, but to imagine one’s way into the mind of the artist is no small feat.

And who can ever tell how far he has succeeded in conveying the feelings and opinions of a man who lived in a modest way, leaving no written record, in the century before last, when our cities were at their stuttering beginnings? Gill, like Mitchell’s hero-narrator Dibble, no doubt had his periods of doing relatively well by his art, and was adroit enough at painting for a market, but couldn’t help being caught out by changing fashions. ‘Just when you think you have arrived,’ says Dibble, ‘you are reminded that it is still no more than a promise’ (286).

What has this country, Australia, got against artists?, he wonders. ‘As though we are an inconvenience in all the jostling to get ahead’ (291). Dibble, industrious and skilled, cannot help envying the easy success of the more privileged Florian Flute – a caustic portrait of George French Angas – while deriding his paintings. When Flute’s ‘folio of sketches’ is published, Dibble rages helplessly for a full two paragraphs against the effrontery which has seen him appropriate three of Dibble’s pictures and publish them as his own. This is unfortunately no baseless slander of Angas. The result is there for all to see in his *South Australia Illustrated*.

Mitchell has structured his novel, which is loosely imagined as a series of notebook entries, around seventeen of Gill’s pictures, reproduced at the beginning of each ‘sketch’, or chapter. He’s done this in a beguilingly indirect way, though. He doesn’t always use the obvious picture to illustrate the events recorded in the chapter, and will often describe a picture which is not included in the book – what he saw, how he arranged his figures and the other elements, the techniques he used to depict the scene and most of all his point of view. I was grateful for Trove and my iPad – it would have been frustrating not to see the paintings as they were being described.

Dibble is a nineteenth-century man, with nineteenth-century opinions that don’t necessarily sit comfortably with current ideas. His attitude to women is typical of the time: he sees Lola Montez performing in Ballarat, and finds her entertaining and at the same time mildly scandalous. The woman he is courting, however, a pianist from ‘a rather more superior establishment’ in Ballarat, is engaged to play for Montez in Bendigo, and ‘I was not sure which grieved me the more – her exposure to such coarseness, or her casual dismissal of it’ (207). At the same time, he is eloquent on behalf of the Aborigines: ‘Truly,’ he writes when they bar the way to his exploring party in inland South Australia, ‘they had not invited us to
come into their lands’ (101); and he deplores the anti-Chinese violence on the goldfields: ‘I do not understand this ugly savagery’ (242), he laments.

*The Profilist* is an absorbing and satisfying book. The research is meticulous, the use of Gill’s paintings is clever and illuminating. But for me the most enthralling aspect of the book is the voice of Ethan Dibble. He is not an ‘unreliable’ narrator. He draws you in with a quiet, subversive wit, explaining the world around it and his place in it – slightly to one side, observing – as it happens. Having a passing acquaintance with prose of the period, I couldn’t fault Mitchell’s impersonation of someone like Gill. Of course this novel is several removes from being Gill’s own account of his life, but such are its seductions that I often found myself unconsciously believing that was what I was reading.