

Herman Koeler's Adelaide: Observations on the Language and Culture of South Australia by the First German Visitor

Peter Mühlhäusler (ed.)

Adelaide: Australian Humanities Press, 2006, 140pp. AUD \$30.00

It is easy for the contemporary Adelaidian to forget that their sleepy town was once a frontier. That Adelaide was a place that evoked mystery, danger, wonder and interest. That it was a bold social experiment. A province (South Australia was never a colony) that might be the better mousetrap of the Imperial way. People came to Adelaide to wonder, to study, to monitor, to experience things that could not be experienced elsewhere. It is very easy to forget these things after only 171 years (there are restaurants in Paris that have run longer than South Australia's white history). It stung Adelaide recently when the Mayor of the Gold Coast, Ron Clarke, piqued by China's decision to send pandas to Adelaide, wondered very vocally who goes to Adelaide except by accident. But it stung because the sleepy town image created by our dissenting church member forefathers has been slow to die. Hermann Koeler had a very different picture of this town.

Mühlhäusler as the book's editor has done an exemplary job in making Koeler's writings available. He is correct when he points out to his reader that some of Koeler's observations, especially some of those related to his contribution to our understanding of the Kaurna language, are of great importance to our contemporary studies. Mühlhäusler is equally correct when he points out that some of Koeler's reactions, impressions and observations are tainted by his—even at the time—extreme right wing views and the reader will find many unsavoury opinions voiced in this book. However if the book demonstrates anything—and it demonstrates many things—it demonstrates that our understanding of mid-nineteenth century racism is a simplistic one. Koeler's racism, while profound, is also complex. There is praise and admiration for South Australia's indigenous inhabitants, but it is filtered through a pervasive racism that places them few steps above fauna. Koeler proves that the historian generalises about eighteenth century racism, just as they generalise about the mind of the European enlightenment at their peril.

One presumes that the prime interest in this book is for the linguist. Not being one myself, the many pages in this fine book devoted to this study were quite challenging

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and there was a temptation to skip through it. However for those whose specialisation lies in this area *Herman Koeler's Adelaide: Observations on the Language and Culture of South Australia by the First German Visitor* will be invaluable. For those whose interest lies in more general history the book remains interesting. For the polymath with feet in both areas it just might be indispensable.

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