

## ***Travelling Home, 'Walkabout Magazine' and Mid-Twentieth Century Australia* by Mitchell Rolls and Anna Johnston (Anthem Press 2017)**

In 1934, the Australian National Travel Authority launched a quality illustrated geographic and tourism magazine, titled *Walkabout: Australia and the South Seas*. The 64-page magazine featured an eclectic array of 'accessible, easy-to-read, informative' (3) articles featuring regions across Australia, and supported by superb photography, a crisp modern design and high production values.

The magazine was a great success, quickly outselling its initial 20,000 print run. By 1946, it was linked with the newly formed Australian Geographical Society officially became Australia's geographic magazine. Its popularity rose over the decades with a loyal and dedicated subscriber base of over 50,000 in the 1960s. Ironically, by that time increasing production costs meant declining profits and the inevitable demise of the magazine in 1978.

Mitchell Rolls and Anna Johnston's *Travelling Home* brings a much-needed critical eye to a genre of writing often overlooked in literary and cultural analysis. As the authors point out, such magazines are regarded as middle-brow literature – which falls between the 'high-brow' canonical literature that receives the bulk of traditional scholarly interest, and the more sensational low-brow literature that has recently attracted a little more attention. Middle-brow literature remains the most neglected area of writing, despite comprising the vast majority, and arguably the most influential, reading matter for the general public.

The middle years of the twentieth century might well be stereotypically characterised by 'conservatism, dull conformity and lack of intellectual vigour' (2) as exemplified by the Literature Censorship Board's heavy handed approach to its task. And indeed, as Rolls and Johnston point out, some scholars have found that selected articles from *Walkabout* support just such a narrow or racist view of Australian society at the time. Significantly, *Travelling Home* analyses the entire publication history of the magazine, its oeuvre as it were. From this perspective, the magazine as a whole tells a different and more nuanced story and includes a diverse and often contradictory range of views which could be seen to give readers agency in reaching their own conclusions.

A magazine founded on the notion that the 'real' Australia is to be found outside the cities, and which encouraged its largely (although not exclusively) urban readership to travel into regional Australia and Oceania might reasonably be expected to suffer from the 'bucolic pastiche or nostalgia' (3) characteristic of radio shows like 'Australia All Over'. But the authors argue that '*Walkabout* did not provide simply a naïve or purposeful conformity iterating nationalist myths; rather, it regularly included material reflecting a genuine desire to be educative' (3). With its careful mix of education and entertainment, '*Walkabout* encouraged readers to come to a better understanding of the national self by exploring the physical, topographical and environmental constituents of the continent' (3).

The magazine fostered a particular way of looking at ourselves and others, which the authors argue can be seen as both world-making and self-fashioning. In a time when Australia was rapidly moving away from a dependence on Europe, *Walkabout* placed Australia in a local south

Pacific context. And as increasing private travel became a regular feature of many Australian's lives, the magazine provided instructions for how to be a tourist, promoting active, affective experiential engagement with the places visited. *Walkabout* took Australians out of the city and into the broader regions, offering distinctive, individual descriptions of different regions of the country, rather than the clichéd, homogenised version of Australia we often see sold into the tourism market today. At this time, the magazine was selling Australia to a local market, not an international one, despite the fact that it was also distributed overseas.

The book traverses the publication history of the magazine, assessing its contributors – literary, travel, anthropological and natural history writers – and how their rhetorical style contributed to a development of an overtly accessible middle-brow culture. The diversity of writers contributed to the magazine's ability to balance a wide range of opinion and approach, as exemplified by regular articles from the progressive and radical Katherine Susannah Pritchard as well as the more establishment and conservative Henrietta Drake-Brockman.

The inaugural issue of the magazine featured a striking image of an 'Australian Aboriginal' in traditional dress. This image sets the tone for subsequent issues which consistently included articles or photographs on Indigenous affairs. While many of these reflect attitudes or language that might be deemed derogatory today, Rolls and Johnston argue that they nonetheless present a complex and detailed account of Aboriginal life and affairs in Australia which is more nuanced than individual articles suggest when examined in isolation.

Similarly, the magazine displays a diversity of often conflicting articles around development and conservation. *Walkabout* was clearly a progressive and 'modern' magazine, supporting rural industries, particularly agriculture and tourism. As such regional Australia was often depicted as an untapped resource waiting to be unlocked by technological developments such as irrigation. Simultaneously tourism relied strongly on the preservation of wildlife and scenic landscapes whilst also potentially threatening its survival. With this dual focus, *Walkabout* provides an early reflection of an ongoing conflict in landscape management.

*Travelling Home* concludes by placing Australia within the context of the Pacific, examining how *Walkabout* depicted our neighbours and what it can tell us about ourselves and Australia's often neo-colonial interests in the region.

One of the great strengths of the book is its wealth of detailed information and data. The style, unlike the magazine under consideration, sways more towards the academic than the popular. I did find myself at times longing for a few succinct well-designed tables which might alleviate the text of the rich burden of its data, whilst also making that information much more accessible and readable.

Given the detailed analysis the book contains it seems unfair to ask for more. The authors spend a little time contrasting *Walkabout* with the highly gendered contemporaneous magazines like *Australian Women's Weekly* and *Man*, which made me wonder what a broader comparison across the wider range of Australian magazines at the time – literary, cultural, political, natural history and geographic – might reveal. Did *Walkabout* replace other earlier journals covering similar material (like *Lone Hand*, for example) and to what extent has its role been filled by

other magazines like the high quality *Nature Australia* or the more popular *Australian Geographic*?

As a magazine that could be found in many Australian lounge rooms, waiting rooms, libraries and tourist offices, *Walkabout* is recalled with affection by many. It developed strong connections with its readership through letters and surveys. Rolls and Johnston make a convincing case that popular accessible magazine literature like this makes a major contribution to Australia's cultural heritage. It has helped shape a 'distinctly modern national imagining' (6) of the Australian identity and is worthy of much greater scholarly attention than it currently receives. *Travelling Home* goes a long way towards beginning that redress.

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