

**Friedrich Gerstäcker, *Australia: A German Traveller in the Age of Gold* edited by Peter Monteath (Wakefield Press, 2016)**

Sometimes it is only possible to see something clearly by choosing to view it through a different perspective. Travel writing offers an insight into foreign places through the perspective of a foreigner. There are ethical considerations to keep in mind when providing a commentary on a place a person has only perused for a few hours or days, yet for travellers who take the time to immerse themselves long-term in a particular region, there can be much to learn from their insight.

German travel writer Friedrich Gerstäcker, born in Hamburg in 1816, dedicated much of his life to travelling and writing about his adventures. In 1851, he arrived in Australia, landing first in Sydney, before navigating part of the way to Adelaide along the Murray River in a canoe and then continuing to the city on foot. The Australian leg of Gerstäcker's travels was published by Stuttgart publishing house J. G. Cotta (who also funded Gerstäcker's journey) in a volume titled *Australien* in 1854. *Australia: A German Traveller in the Age of Gold*, edited by Peter Monteath, is a translation of the original 1854 volume *Australien*. Versions of *Australien* have previously appeared in English, yet in much-abridged editions. Monteath and a team of dedicated translators have translated Gerstäcker's original work, where his unique perspectives on the harsh Australian landscape and Australian people offer an insight into the Australia of the 1850s, on the brink of the Gold Rush.

Gerstäcker recounts his Australian adventures with humour and suspense. After arriving in Sydney and spending some time there, Gerstäcker decides to travel to Albury by mail coach (the only available option) before canoeing down the Hume River and onto the Murray River in order to get to Adelaide. Gerstäcker writes that 'a passenger who embarks on a journey on the "Royal Mail"... may just as well commit his soul into God's hands and concentrate totally on his body, for surely his mistreatment will take up all his time and attention' (31). He then launches into a detailed account of the haphazard journey itself, and does not even try to hide his distaste:

As he whipped the horses on, the coach – if I may stoop to such crude flattery in calling such a vehicle a coach – shot ahead. With a sudden jolt, or should I say a series of jolts, we were shaken about so mercilessly that some of the passengers sat down, and not in a civilised and socially approved manner. (35)

It is apparent early on that Gerstäcker is an experienced traveller. Logistical difficulties appear not to perturb him, even when faced with the difficulty of sourcing a canoe for his journey down the Murray River, and the challenges of the journey itself. He displays an eternal optimism that does not leave him, even in the trickiest of situations. During the difficult journey down the Murray, the canoe floods with water and Gerstäcker loses many of his possessions, to the point that all he has left to steer the canoe with is a frying pan: 'My good spirits did not desert me for even a moment – I was now once again in a particularly bad "scrape" as the Americans call it, and for now I had nothing more to do than to find a way out of it' (57). He is very pragmatic: out in the middle of nowhere, his only option is to keep going, despite the difficulties, in order to survive.

Gerstäcker writes beautiful descriptions of the Australian landscape, which give a real feel for just how wild, unkempt and isolated the country regions were at the time: 'The coarse sandhills covered with mallee, the wonderful bushes and beautifully formed little spruces growing out of

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*Transnational Literature* Vol. 9 no. 2, May 2017.

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them, surrounded me like a surging tide' (91). Gerstäcker constantly compares the Australian landscape to that of America, as he travelled in America for many months before arriving in Australia. It is his point of reference as both lands were colonised by the British. In describing the Murray River's unsuitability for growing crops, Gerstäcker observes that 'the valley is not broad and fertile enough to permit levees or dams of the kind, for example, that hold back the waters on the banks of the Mississippi' (54). Even if the reader is unfamiliar with both the USA and Australia, these comparisons illustrate how unique the Australian landscape really is.

One of the most revealing aspects about Australia in this book is Gerstäcker's descriptions of the Barossa Valley. The Barossa was very much a German community at the time, and Gerstäcker writes that 'It was a very strange feeling for me to find myself suddenly – in a foreign land and continent and even in an English colony – surrounded by nothing but Germans, and in fact a purely German way of life and doing things' (153). Gerstäcker's descriptions reveal the extent of the German language and culture in the Barossa Valley at the time, illustrating the strength and vibrancy of the German community in the region. It also provides a contrast to the modern-day Barossa Valley, where remnants of its German heritage can be found if a person chooses to look for them, but it is no longer the vibrant German community it once was.

Peter Monteath and his team of translators have captured the spirit of Gerstäcker's travels in *Australia: A German Traveller in the Age of Gold*. Gerstäcker's travels preserve 1850s Australia, and capture the early beginnings of colonised Australia and the hardships faced in the country during that time. The book not only offers the reader a different perspective on this era in Australia's history, but also highlights just how different the Australia of less than 200 years ago is to the Australia of today.

**Raelke Grimmer**