

**Susannah Fullerton, *Brief Encounters: Literary Travellers in Australia 1836-1939* (Boomerang Books, 2009)**

This book is a delight to anyone who enjoys literary gossip. It is an account of the travels to Australia by ten men and one woman, all writers, throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, their impressions and records of these travels and the reception of these impressions by their anxious hosts. Many of them are already familiar to the general reader: most of us with any interest in literature and in Australia already know about Trollope, Mark Twain and DH Lawrence. The recorded impressions of Charles Darwin, RL Stevenson and Rudyard Kipling are perhaps less well known. The other writers included are Conan Doyle, Jack London, Conrad and HG Wells, and the one woman, Agatha Christie. Each chapter opens with a brief general biography of the writer up until the time of their trip to Australia, followed by a detailed account of the trip or trips (Stevenson came four times). Some of the writers were established and already famous when they arrived here, and were consequently lionised. For instance everyone knew Conan Doyle as the writer of the Sherlock Holmes stories, but all he wanted to talk about was spiritualism. His trip was not a success, at least from his point of view. Other writers were unknown at the time of their visit. Conrad visited Australia many times, but as an officer in the Merchant Marine, not as a writer.

The most amusing bit of each chapter is the account of the impression made by the visitors and their subsequent writings. Australians have always been notoriously touchy about travellers' opinions, indeed the national sensitivity seems sometimes to amount to paranoia. Terms such as 'world class' and 'greatest in the Southern Hemisphere' are evidence of this. Any newcomer, famous or not, is asked on arrival what he or she thinks of the Opera House, the Harbour Bridge or the weather. And woe betide any opinion which is less than enthusiastic! When I first arrived in Adelaide many years ago I tried to express my sense that I was very lucky to arrive in such a pleasant spot; but I couldn't get my words in edgeways – the locals told me how lucky I was! Trollope complains of the habit of 'blowing' (boasting) particularly among the denizens of Melbourne, then as now anxious to establish its superiority to Sydney.

The grumpiest of all the literary visitors discussed in this book was undoubtedly HG Wells, who is also the last to be included. (The arrangement is sensibly chronological). Speaking out against Hitler and Mussolini (his visit was in 1939) he offended the Prime Minister of the day, Joe Lyons, who protested about harm to trade and diplomatic relations with Germany; speaking out for abortion he offended the Catholics; and speaking out against Jewish separatism he offended Australia's Jewish community, at a time when Nazi persecution was nearly at its worst. He was an old man (he died a few years later, having written his last book, *Mind at the End of its Tether*) but his opinions on most of the matters which caused such offence have been vindicated by time.

The most interesting chapter of all is that on DH Lawrence. *Kangaroo* is certainly not one of DHL's best books, but provides a brilliant evocation of the mysterious qualities of the Australian bush, and a curious anticipation of the quasi-fascist political movement among ex-servicemen that appeared ten years later in the 1930s. This is, of course, material that has been discussed in earlier books, and Ms

Fullerton does not pretend to offer a work of original research; it is rather a compilation of secondary sources, meticulously referenced. The references, however, are curiously irritating. Each chapter has a separate bibliography, and the works cited are identified by title. Since nearly every biography of Charles Darwin, for instance (and there are many such) is entitled *Charles Darwin* it is often difficult to make out which one is meant. Why not refer to the works by author's name, as is more usual? I blame the publishers, rather than the author, for this, which is my only cavil at a book which is a most entertaining and informative read.

**Humphrey Tranter**