

## Summary of September Address

**Guest Speaker – Susannah Fullerton** Subject “*Literary Travellers in Australia*”.

Reflecting on our warm memories of Susannah’s delightful presentation in July 2008 on why we should all read Jane Austen, anticipation of another entertaining episode was clearly evident right from Hugh Taylor’s introduction.

And we were not to be disappointed. This time we were treated to eleven vignettes from her recently published book “*Brief Encounters – Literary Travellers in Australia*” about famous writers who had visited our shores during the century from 1836 to 1939 – and in particular their views on our antipodean locale at the time, also resultant references to Australia in their writings.

Susannah set the scene by bringing to our attention the bronze plaques inserted in the pavement approaching the Opera House which include the subject writers (except Agatha Christie and H G Wells) and quotations attributed to them.

Firstly **Charles Darwin** arrived on the *Beagle* in 1837 for scientific purposes – to study the geography, flora and fauna. Having been away from home for some 4 years, his disappointment on arrival is considered to have been coloured by being desperate for family letters and other news from home. Finding the extreme heat difficult, he potted around the edge of the harbour then travelled through the Blue Mountains to Bathurst. Out there his findings included 2 insects in a death struggle – noting them similar to insects back in England but that they had adapted to local conditions. He went on to Tasmania where his desire to study a deadly poisonous snake on Mt Wellington was frustrated by its escape. Moving on to Western Australia he saw a corroboree, then sailed for home stating he never wanted to get on a boat again. He did however maintain an interest in Australia and had on his wall a painting by his life-long friend Conrad Martens who had accompanied him on the *Beagle* and settled here. In summary, Darwin was depressed while here, finding everything remote and backward.

The second author is **Anthony Trollope** (credited with 49 books) who visited twice during 1871 – 75 at the behest of his publisher to write travel books on Australia and NZ. An organised soul, he wrote a novel on the trip out, planning how much to write each day in order to complete it on arrival and wrote “The end” as the ship tied up in Melbourne. The book reflected the journey with the heroine and her husband arriving in Melbourne simultaneously with reality. Trollope had an interesting time travelling all over the country including assisting his son Fred who had property in Northern NSW. He experienced an Australian bush Christmas and his 3 books with local flavour included “*Harry Heathcote of Gangoil*”, (the Australian bush) “*John Caldigate*”, (reflecting Trollope’s employment in the Post Office) and “*Australia and New Zealand*” (written for middle class UK people who may want to come out). Continual queries about his attitude to Australia greatly annoyed him. Part of the Hawkesbury is named after him.

Number three is **Joseph Conrad** a sailor in the British merchant marine who only saw edges of Australia (also Australia only appears at the edges of his stories). On his first visit, as a night watchman on the ship based at The Rocks, he experienced the rough life in that part of town. He later visited Hobart, then Adelaide where he met John Galsworthy.

Number four is **Robert Louis Stevenson**. Based in Samoa he came to Sydney for breaks and restocking such as clothing purchases. Staying at the Union Club in Bligh Street (forerunner of our host Club), he was a seriously ill man and spent time just sitting in a chair which is still in the Club. His wife thought Sydney populace had a criminal bent. At Balmoral Beach he met artists Streeton and Ashton and he signed the 1<sup>st</sup> edition of “*Treasure Island*” whilst here. He looked at a map of Melbourne which made him want to vomit. “*The Wrecker*” which he co wrote with Lloyd Osborne is his only book on Sydney.

Number five – **Rudyard Kipling** – was only out here for 2 weeks, spending most of the time in Melbourne then travelling by train to Sydney where he notes it was “lovely and sunny, all having picnics”. In “*Old Man Kangaroo*” he explains how the kangaroo’s unusual shape results from it being chased by a dingo until the hind legs grow progressively larger and the front ones diminish. When the Shrine of Remembrance was built in Melbourne, he was requested to write a poem which is inscribed inside, (he found it hard to do as he lost a son in WW1). The smell of wattle made him homesick. Meeting Australian troops in the Boer War – these fine young men changed his view of Aussies for the better.

Next at number six is **Mark Twain** who came here to make us laugh. A machine he invented resulted in his bankruptcy and he set out on a world-wide trip to earn money to repay creditors. People found him very funny, although the loss of a daughter whilst he was in the UK reflected sadness in his writings.

To number seven - **Jack London**. Sailing the South Pacific with his wife, illness caused him to check into a Sydney hospital. He subsequently went on to Tasmania. Whilst in Sydney he was ringside on Boxing Day 1908, having been requested to do a world-wide newspaper report on the famous fight between Texan negro Jack Johnson and Canadian Tommy Burns. Johnson won the fight and the racist crowd left as if it was a funeral. London's pro Johnson article resulted in wide controversy including race fights in the US. In a later very sad book about Johnson, "*A Piece of Steak*" London refers to the old man fighting to get sustenance. London eventually died of alcoholism.

Now at number eight we have **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle**, the creator of Sherlock Holmes. During one of the many phases of his life, he was coming here as part of a world tour to talk about spiritualism, and apparently many hoped the ship would sink on the way. So high was the feeling that he required a police escort from the ground after a rugby match in Melbourne. He visited Bondi, The Hydro Majestic at Blackheath and New Zealand. He wrote one book referring to Australia – Susannah's comment "it's boring, don't bother". On to number nine - **Agatha Christie**. Travelling with a mission to encourage inclusion of Australian goods at the 1924 UK Exhibition, she travelled widely (was photographed visiting the SPC cannery in Shepparton Vic) and was very impressed by Australian women generally. Her husband left her two years after her Australian visit and her second husband was an archaeologist. She enjoyed travelling with him on his expeditions - his findings made her look young.

Number ten – **D H Lawrence**. Arrived in WA, then came via Sydney to Thirroul on the South Coast. He was here for 3 months He co wrote "*The Boy in the Bush*" - known as the forgotten Australian novel and wrote "*Kangaroo*" an acclaimed fictional insight into Australia - but interestingly had to go to Taronga Park Zoo to find one. He was an inspiration to Australian writers and artists at Thirroul.

And finally at number eleven **H G Wells**. It was horrendously hot in 1938/39 while he was here (the horrific January 1939 bushfires which devastated Victoria and which he saw first-hand outside Canberra.), and he was grumpy, upsetting everyone including Jews, politicians and others. He particularly upset our Prime Minister Joe Lyons by referring to Adolf Hitler as a certifiable lunatic – maybe politically incorrect at the time but thoroughly justified very soon thereafter. Immediately after the Canberra bushfire he wrote a description, got on a plane and left. He did however indicate in a radio broadcast that he found it a well run country with good institutions.

Susannah reminded us that whilst today information is readily available via T/V, radio, Google etc, previously writers were very important in describing countries.

She also noted with interest the statue of Robbie Burns outside the State Library although he never came here.

Although this précis does not adequately convey the real ambience of Susannah's presentation, support to Ray Hyslop's vote of thanks clearly conveyed our overwhelming appreciation. A truly fitting follow up to her earlier visit.