

Judges' Comments

ALEX BUZO AWARD SHORTLIST 2014

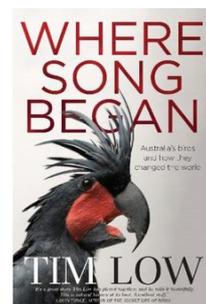
Jackie French: LET THE LAND SPEAK

Though its subtitle includes the phrase “A history of Australia”, this highly personal response to this country’s past, its landscape, and its future is unlike any other work of history. Beginning with the goat on board Captain Cook’s ship *Endeavour*, and ranging from the first canoe-borne migrants to the once uninhabited continent to those ancestors of hers who first came as free settlers to the new colony at the end of the 1830s, the author transforms each of those moments she sees as crucial to the development of our nation into an imaginative tableau, recreating the vision and the emotions of the participants. One chapter views our history through the archetypal cookery that has inspired the pumpkin scone, the Anzac biscuit and the lamington, and helpfully includes recipes. Other crucial moments that are considered include the Eureka stockade, the Federation drought, and the two World Wars. There are also informative lists at the end of the book, including “Sixteen suggestions for survival” and “Twenty-four predictions”, and in all of these the land itself is the most significant actor. This book is a daring departure for one of our most highly awarded children’s writers.



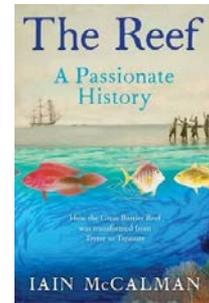
Tim Low: WHERE SONG BEGAN

The significance of birds to Australia’s ecology, its landscape and its culture, has been misunderstood and underestimated. The early settlers and explorers referred to the “silent forest”, and only noticed cockatoos “shrieking like evil souls”, when the reverse of their perception was true. The truth was to be found in close observation of the bird life itself, in analysis of the fossil record and examination of anatomy, and in particular by listening to the richly varied song of birds as unique as the lyrebird, the bell miner and the kookaburra. By pollinating plants and distributing seeds, birds are responsible for the spread of Australian forests, even though some of our birds destroy their own habitat by eating it. As the climate has changed, birds have adapted. Yet this extraordinary book, by the winner of the inaugural Waverley Library Prize for Literature, is not just a study of birds and their behaviour; it is a profoundly original account of the entire natural history – including landforms, plants, insects, mammals and marsupials as well as birds – of a region that is unique in the world. It is a region that, “biologically speaking”, includes New Guinea, where the story has been “one of winners and losers”, the winners being the “smart, aggressive birds enjoying the changes people have made.” All of these complex scientific facts and ideas are explained in a prose style of exemplary clarity.



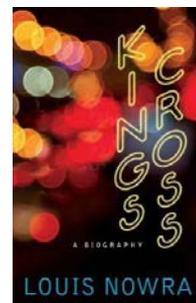
Iain McCalman: THE REEF

Captain Cook's ship *Endeavour* impaled itself on a coral reef near what he named Cape Tribulation. The resulting leak was stopped by "the young midshipman Jonathan Monkhouse's brilliant fothering", which means that he filled canvas sails with "loose clumps of oakum, wool and sheep's dung, 'or other filth." Quirky details, such as these, and revealing stories, enhance the highly readable narrative of this historical overview of one of Australia's most famous geographical features. The book is structured around twelve central incidents, involving such well-known figures as Captain Cook, Matthew Flinders, Eliza Fraser, Charles Darwin, and the beachcomber Ted Banfield. By recreating these incidents, he focuses the reader's attention on the historic interaction between humans and the reef, and explains how its ecology has come to be at risk. He concludes with a quote from "Charlie" Veron, a marine scientist who sees what is happening to the coral labyrinth described on UNESCO's World Heritage listing as "the most impressive marine area in the world" as being like "seeing a house on fire in slow motion." His plea is to "help to get this story recognized," and this extensively researched argument should make a significant contribution toward that recognition.



Louis Nowra: KINGS CROSS

To the poet Kenneth Slessor, Kings Cross "will always be a tract apart from the rest of Sydney, still contemptuous of the rules, still defiantly unlike any other part of any other city in Australia." This account of the "tract apart" is, in turn, unlike any other evocation of place and time in Australia's literature. Like Kings Cross itself, it is a haphazardly stitched patchwork of impressions, buildings, anecdotes, character portraits, and unlikely facts. As a long-term resident of the area, the author is able to relate many first-hand experiences, yet he has also researched the history of the Cross and its inhabitants in impressive detail. From David Scott Mitchell, founder of the Mitchell Library to Rene Rivkin; from Tilly Devine to Abe Saffron; from Rosaleen Norton and Eugene Goossens to the writers and artists who have lived and worked there, such as Slessor, Robin Dalton, Kylie Tennant, Mary Gilmore, Betty Roland, William Dobell, George Sprod and Donald Friend, all come to life in stories that also include some astute critical observations on their achievements. This well-written book is as informative as it is readable.



Pamela Williams: KILLING FAIRFAX

The threatened closure of the printed version of *The Sydney Morning Herald* appears to be the inevitable outcome of the corporate battles that began a decade ago. The killers of the newspaper's publisher, by their own estimation, are the two sons of media magnates who appear on this book's front cover and in its subtitle: James Packer and Lachlan Murdoch. Among their motives was a desire for revenge for the humiliation both suffered over their investment in the ill-advised OneTel venture, but both families had harboured enmity toward the Fairfaxes for several generations. The intricacies of boardroom negotiations, share price fluctuations, offers and counter-offers, bank loans and interest payments, management and machination, might not appear to be topics of compelling interest to anyone except the participants, but the author of this book, an award-winning Fairfax journalist, has transformed this unpromising material into an absorbing narrative. The influence of online media on the profitability, and relevance, of traditional newspapers is a subject of incalculable value to the community, while the presence of many larger than life characters in the events described will hold the attention of any reader. As one of the businessmen interviewed for the book observes, "With Packer's people, I felt a bit like I was someone in an episode of *The Sopranos*, someone who might not still be there in the next series."



Clare Wright: THE FORGOTTEN REBELS OF EUREKA

The Eureka Stockade rebellion was a minor incident that acquired the status of legend long after the event. But legends are often formed through embellishment and omission, and a major omission from traditional accounts of the ill-fated rebellion has been of the fact that there were women present. The landlady of the Eureka Hotel was Catherine Bentley, a young Irishwoman who had married a former convict and become wealthy, and the burning of her hotel was a sign of the public unrest that led, a few weeks later, to the legendary stockade. By researching the story of Mrs Bentley, the author of this powerful book discovered records of many other women who were present on the Ballarat goldfields, and by seeing the story from their point of view has been able to show, in vivid and entertaining detail, how much has remained unknown in the narrative that quickly became so well known that even Karl Marx was inspired to comment on it. Everyone is aware of the diggers' leader, Peter Lalor, but who has heard of Mrs McLister, who claimed that the police inspector put his arm around her waist, while "the front of his pantaloons were open and his person exposed"? All of this, and more, is related in a style as racy and readable as that of any novel.

