

ROMANCE OF A MAGISTRATE

by Michael Kirby

Robbery Under Arms,

by Rolf Boldrewood, edited by Paul Eggert

and Elizabeth Webby;

University of Queensland Press (The

Academy Editions of Australian Literature),

2006, \$175.

THE AUSTRALIAN CLASSIC *Robbery Under Arms,*

first published in 1883 in serial form in the

Sydney Mail, has been republished by the

University of Queensland Press. The new edi-

tion comprises a book within a book because a

separate section comprises a description of the proj-

ect which the text was reassembled on the basis of

comparisons with earlier editions. What the edi-

tors attempted is not a facsimile of earlier editions

but a correction to previous versions designed to

remove mistakes, omissions and abbreviations that

made the book confusing and often difficult to follow.

Rolf Boldrewood was the pen-name of Thomas

Brown (who, after 1864, adopted the style *Browne*). He

led quite an interesting life. He was born in London but

came to Sydney at the age of five on a ship that was

transporting convicts to the colony. He seems to have

experienced early pretensions of social grandeur: feelings

frustrated by endemic divisions in the penal colony. At

the age of twenty-eight, he was elected to the

Reading Club.

In 1871 following pressure deftly applied to influ-

ential relatives, he was appointed the Police Magistrate

along in New South Wales at £500 a year. In 1880

he was promoted to Police Magistrate at Dubbo. This

office coincided with widespread publicity about

Kelly's last stand at Glenrowan in Victoria. Perhaps

the drama and instant romance of the Kelly Gang

stimulation of cases coming before him in court

persuaded Browne to write a story about

robbers and other miscreants and their encounters

with society and the law.

In the tradition of the times, *Robbery Under Arms*

was serialised and then published in three volumes in

Sydney and London. It immediately became a hit at

the ends of the world. The book was adapted for the

stage in the 1890s and brought a kind of fame to

Brown, who died in 1915 in his ninetieth year.

Since then, the book has inspired two feature films

and a mini-series on television celebrating its anti-hero,

the national bushranger Captain Starlight. Reflecting

the social values of his inventor, Starlight was born an

aristocratic gentleman but for years led a roving life of

adventure and crime. *Robbery Under Arms* tells the story of some of these adventures through the recollections of Dick Marston, an Australian bushranger who fell in with Starlight's gang. In form, the book is the autobiography of Marston, told at first as he languishes in jail under sentence of death. It describes the adventures, including romantic adventures, of Marston and Starlight, the trial of Starlight and his accomplices, the verdict of guilty and death sentence, the reprieve of Marston, an escape from Berrima jail, and some rather unlikely adventures as the book moves to its resolution.

The character development in this rather protracted yarn is pretty superficial. There is little reflection upon the social causes of the bushranger phenomenon. The author exhibits a deference and respect for the British upper class, and its values, that was to last in Australia well into the twentieth century. Yet despite these weaknesses, the book has become an Australian classic because of the way it records the bush culture of the time through picaresque adventures told with a healthy serving of apparently authentic slang and rough language.

No doubt, whilst sitting in the Dubbo court, Browne witnessed a parade of thieves, robbers and bushrangers before him. He writes with a measure of sympathy for the men who were caught up in a life of crime in the colony. His book was controversial when first published because of the bad language in the text and the protests of the daily newspapers, even then full of self-righteousness and moralising, that the story of Starlight and his crew would encourage others to abandon the aspiration that all right-thinking colonists should have, to cherish the values of the "gentle folk" of England and of the sunlit global empire over which they then presided.

To some extent the stories of youthful defiance, outrageous behaviour and matchless courage recorded in the book contributed to developing notions of national characteristics that were to be reinforced at Gallipoli, in the Western Desert and on the Kokoda Trail. In this sense, Browne made an unconscious addition to the emerging portrait of the rough but resilient Australian man of the bush. No doubt that is why *Robbery* has gone through twelve editions and 130 impressions in the past century and a quarter. The book is not specially well written. It bears the indelible evidence of the serialisation in which the episodes first appeared. But it does capture an authentic feel of the times.

SOME OF THE MOST interesting aspects of the new edition appear in the background story of its production that accompanies the text. That story is put together by Professors Paul Eggert (UNSW) and Elizabeth Webby (Sydney). In an extended foreword by the general editor of the Academy Editions of Australian Literature, he explains the principles that governed the production. There is an excellent

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ology of Browne and his works. An extensive introductory chapter contrasts rural life of Australia and America at the time *Robbery* was written. Australia is described as "America with a chubby face". The book is accompanied by extensive explanatory notes, detailed descriptions of the places mentioned in the text accompanied by maps, a substantial glossary and editorial introductions.

Occasionally one wishes that the substantive work included in these pages was more deserving of such editorial devotion. There are many Australian books of this kind, including recent ones, which are much better written and more insightful. Still the editors of this last volume in the series of Academy Editions of Australian literature are to be congratulated for assembling the new edition of an important mood piece that recreates the life and times of rustic Australia in the age of the lawless bushrangers.

There is a curiosity in the fact that Browne, who would have spent most of his time locking up such criminals and even sending them on their way towards the

gallows, could obviously empathise with the people involved yet fail to ever reflect on what brought them to their fate. Perhaps we make the same mistake today with contemporary prisoners—drug users and terror suspects.

It seems unlikely that the University of Queensland Press, which published this book for the Australian Academy of the Humanities, will make a big profit from this expensively produced series. But this new edition will probably become the definitive one. Future generations of Australian readers, thirsting for accurate images of the country's colonial times, will be grateful that such an edition has now been published and that, in the course of doing so, the editors have told us much that the author omitted to record about the Australian colonies in the age of bushrangers and of the law officers who were determined to uphold the Queen's peace so far from home.

Justice Michael Kirby is a Justice of the High Court of Australia.

As I pour wine in the dark
I listen to the sound it makes
I know when the glass is half full.

THE FACE OF THE BODY

The artist's model sees everything but she never speaks.
The actor calls the chest and belly the face of their body.
She puts on her clothes to be unrecognisable. None of them remember her face. The actor opens the face of his/her body and engages with the audience. Maybe winks.
She must learn to NOT be naked. And to speak. Speak.

FRAGMENT

... for he was wearing the sable coat he had inherited
and beside him, on the table, was the mascara of immaturity.

Jennifer Compton