

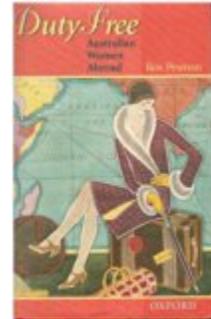
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ros Pesman. *Duty Free: Australian Women Abroad*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1996. viii + 271 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-553639-3.

Ros Pesman, David Walker, Richard White, eds. *Oxford Book of Australian Travel Writing*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1996. xxiv + 328 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-553640-9.

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Ros Pesman's book, *Duty Free: Australian Women Abroad*, has such a good title and such a good cover illustration that it is impossible not to be well-disposed towards it. Theo Proctor's 1929 illustration of a stylish young woman sitting on a trunk labelled "London" against a map of the sea routes to Europe conjures up the anticipation Pesman herself admits to when, as a young woman over thirty years ago, she boarded the *Fairsky* in search of Europe and freedom. Written out of a passion for travel, *Duty Free* is a history of those Australian women who took passage to Europe.

The structure of *Duty Free* is broadly chronological, beginning with the colonial elite who travelled to Europe seeking high culture and ending around 1970 with Pesman's own generation who left by steamship and returned by 747. Within that chronology, Pesman examines the diverse and shifting reasons why Australian women were pulled towards Europe, interposing between the chapters the stories of individuals, such as Annie Duncan who found financial independence in the 1890s as an inspector of laundries and workrooms in London; or Doris Birtles and Irene Saxby who joined the struggle against fascism in the 1930s, Birtles in Greece and London, Saxby in Moscow.

This movement between survey and individual story works well, and it reflects the healthy awareness among Australian historians, especially women, of cultural diversity. As Pesman puts it: "There is no woman's trip, no woman's travel experience" (p. 9). This awareness of diversity is carried through, despite the book's subtitle,

to the question of an Australian identity itself: "There is no Australian 'identity,' only 'identities,' and these have been forged abroad as well as at home, in contact and collision with others, as well as in isolation" (p. 17). If there is a disappointment in this study, then it is that this "forging" of identity through travel is not more fully discussed; after carefully rehearsing the relationship between women, travel and travel writing, Pesman devotes her study to unwrapping the stories of the women themselves. *Duty Free* is a valediction to "the overseas trip" as a formative event in the lives of many Australian women: "When an event ends, its history begins" (p. 3). As a project, it is understandably tinged with nostalgia, but that may be a price worth paying. Most works of history are generated by some personal experience, and intellectual debate would be more fruitful if historians admitted from the beginning that they were writing about themselves. By placing her own experience within her work (and the first illustration is a snapshot of Ros Pesman in Spain in 1964), there is an honesty in the attempt to understand the women with whom she deals. There is also a kind of parallel between the traveller writing retrospectively to give shape and meaning to the experience, and Pesman as historian giving shape and meaning not only to her own travels but to the whole story of women travelling to Europe.

The cover and title of *The Oxford Book of Australian Travel Writing* are a little less engaging than those of Pesman's book, but the index is intriguing. There are nine references to "hotels" but only one to "tents". Australians seem to be more intrepid when it comes to "mode of

travel,” and there are entries for camels, sledges and trishaws, G. E. Morrison taking the honours by contriving to travel 2500 kilometres through China in a sedan chair. Curiously, there is no entry for either “cabs” or “taxis,” though there are six references to “cab-drivers”; disappointingly, these turn out to be only four (two of the references are to journeys by train and by sledge), but from the remaining evidence, London cabbies are preferable by far to those of Paris, Naples, or Palopo.

Ros Pesman, David Walker and Richard White hold this diversity together using much the same periodisation as Pesman uses in *Duty Free*. The chronological divisions are helpful if predictable, with divisions being made in 1890, 1914, 1940, and 1970. The section on post-1970 writing, “Travels in Postmodernity,” is not surprisingly dominated by expatriate intellectuals (James, Malouf, Greer, Conrad) and, given the absence of more ordinary voices, this area (along with the index) will need adjusting in later editions. Since *Duty Free* ends around 1970, both studies see postmodernism as categorically different from what preceded it. *Duty Free* talks of the new global village, while *The Oxford Book of Australian Travel Writing* deals with postmodernism in terms of a reevaluation of the margins: “Australia was condemned to a metropolitan status just as the centrifugal rush off to the periphery began” (p. 242). A comment worthy of Clive James himself.

Given their acceptance of postmodernism as a break with the past, neither work provides a model that accounts for continuities, particularly in terms of colonialism, from the nineteenth-century to the present day. An appeal to globalisation overlooks the ways in which colonialism continues to figure in debates about how Australia and Britain imagine themselves; and the reversal of centre and periphery ignores the ways in which such

concepts were always unstable, ways in which Australia itself was always metropolitan. The discourse of history is perhaps unable to mesh with the methodologies of cultural studies, a division most apparent within Australian Studies; Australia’s recent cultural history tends to be looked at from a cultural studies perspective, whilst earlier periods fall to historians of one sort or another. The result is that while studies of contemporary Australia attempt deliberately to unsettle the old imperial structures of power, the national focus of Australian history tends to reduce the nineteenth-century to a colonial and pre-nationalist past, a tendency shared by both studies under review. Most nineteenth-century writing can be regarded as merely a sub-branch of English travel literature, with some colonial resonances.

Of course neither work under review succumbs to so crude a division as I have outlined, but both seem unsure of how to deal with recent writing, and this suggests that Australian cultural history could be productively re-read using the methodologies of cultural studies. This will not reduce colonial Australians to postmodern subjects, but it may permit a discussion of Australian history that is not so dependent on a narrativisation of the past, a narrativisation that currently leads to a clash with postmodernism. The dilemma of both *Duty Free* and *The Oxford Book of Australian Travel Writing* is that in seeking to trace the historical development of an Australian identity, they are brought to a halt with unruly travellers and the apparent diffusion of that identity. The question perhaps is whether this is a problem with the world, or a problem with historical narrative.

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