

QUADRANT

Rolf Boldrewood

ROBBERY UNDER ARMS

(Edited by Paul Eggert and Elizabeth Webby), University of Queensland Press, 2006

Foreword etc i-lxxxix, Text 1-603, Background and Notes, 604-705, Glossary etc , 706-743, Hardback (The Academy Editions of Australian Literature \$175

The Australian classic, *Robbery Under Arms*, first published in 1883 in serial form in the *Sydney Mail*, has been republished by University of Queensland Press. The new edition contributes a book within a book because a significant section comprises a description of the project by which the text was reassembled on the basis of close comparisons with earlier editions. What the editors have 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 1884, adopted the style Browne). He had 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 acquired early pretensions of social grandeur: feelings encouraged by endemic divisions in the penal colony. At the age of 28, he was elected to the Melbourne Club. In 1871, following pressure deftly applied to influential relatives, he was appointed the Police Magistrate at Gulgong in New South Wales at £500 a year. In 1880 he was promoted to Police Magistrate at Dubbo. This new office coincided with widespread

publicity about Ned Kelly's last stand at Glenrowan in Victoria. Perhaps it was the drama and instant romance of the Kelly gang or the stimulation of cases coming before him in court that persuaded Browne to write a story about bushrangers 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 both ends of the world. The book was adapted for the stage in the 1890s and brought a kind of fame to Browne 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, fictional bushranger, Captain Starlight. Reflecting the social values of his inventor, Starlight was born an English 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 goal 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 goal and some rather unlikely adventures as the book moves to its resolution.

3.

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 one hundred and thirty 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 Australia Literature, he explains the principles that governed the production. There is an excellent chronology 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 emendations.

Occasionally one wishes that the substantive work captured in these pages was more deserving of such editorial devotion. There are many Australian books of fiction, including recently, which are much better written and more insightful. Still the editors of this last in the series of Academy Editions of Australian Literature are to be congratulated for assembling the definitive edition of an important mood piece that recreates the life and times of rustic Australia in the age of notorious bushrangers.

There is a curiosity in the fact that Browne, who would have spent most of his time locking up such people 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 University of Queensland Press that 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.

Michael Kirby*

* Justice Michael Kirby is a judge of the High Court of Australia

QUADRANT

ROLF BOLDREWOOD

ROBBERY UNDER ARMS

Michael Kirby