‘The privilege of mobility’: the travel colonial writings of George French Angas and William Cawthorne.

Rick Hosking

English Department,

Flinders University

Abstract

George French Angas was the son of one of the ‘founding fathers’ of South Australia, while William Anderson Cawthorne was an Adelaide schoolteacher who met Angas in 1844, introduced him to members of the Kaurna people and gave him insights into their culture, and in particular to the Kuri, a dramatic public dance performance of the Kaurna. Angas went home to present his drawings to Queen Victoria in 1846 and a year later to publish Savage Life and Scenes in London, one of the best and most influential of the early illustrated travel books about South Australia. Cawthorne, however, could not find even a local publisher for his ethnographic essays and watercolours, managing only to publish a few occasional travel pieces here and there in the Adelaide papers. In her Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation (1992) Mary Louise Pratt notes certain patriarchal and imperialist characteristics in colonial travel writing, and while both Angas’s and Cawthorne’s travel writings can be read in the light of such analysis, their individual circumstances and idiosyncrasies challenge the ready imposition of contemporary ways of reading the effects of class, race and
gender. While patrician travellers like George French Angas may have had the ‘privilege of mobility’, their works energising the myths of empire and providing all kinds of promontories from which to gaze, a study of local colonial travel writing reveals individuals shaped as much by an uneasy mix of class origin, family circumstances, professional exigencies, ‘currency’ status, cross-colonial perspectives and ethnic background as by any insistence of the right of mobility and of the power and opportunity to gaze and to represent.