‘Postcards from purgatory: Journals making nowhere somewhere’

Peter Manthorpe
Flinders University

Abstract

Close reading of parts of the journals of Australia's maritime explorers reveals concerns, motivations and prejudices that are often open to interpretations in tension with those stated by the authors. Passages in the journals together with the passages over the earth's surface they describe can be explored for undiscovered meanings by an empathetic reading, a reading which takes into account the physical conditions of shipboard life and the state of mind of the writer-explorer under which the voyage was conducted and the journals written. Navigational concerns of the commander of an expedition can be shown to have influenced the way certain 'discoveries' were described and hence to have influenced the course of colonial history. Also, while many explorers seemed to leave out of their writing any reference to the mundane living conditions aboard their vessels, shipboard life is extraordinary for most readers, so that important elements in the background of the story which go without saying for the knowing writer are lost to the average reader. In addition, evidence can be found that explorers were often influenced by previous explorers' journals, thus repeating mistakes and misconceptions while ostensibly 'discovering' something new. Comparing related journal entries from different explorers and relating contemporary sailing-ship journals to seventeenth and eighteenth century journals (while allowing for obvious differences between different eras in the conditions, motivations and prejudices involved in their production), can provide insights that enrich twenty-first century readings of the explorers' journals from a receding era, insights that can then be reflexively applied to our own contemporary voyage journals.