It was remarked how careless I write my diary—when I can write so well. How much better it would look in a nice, neat hand, instead of a blotty, scrawly, scratchy, ugly, unintelligible manner in which the last vol. was written etc. To these I answer, first, that I cannot spend as much time in making flourishes and that it is of no particular odds in what way it is written as long as the SUBJECT is understood and, secondly, I often don’t know how much I am going to write and therefore I write quick, so that I shall not lose any time. And as for the blots and scratches, they originate through the Diary being written Extempore, not allowing, very seldom, a second thought on what I am going to write.¹

The Adelaide schoolteacher William Anderson Cawthorne began writing his ‘Literarium Diarium’ 22 October 1842, keeping the diary going until the 1860s. It survives in a number of battered volumes in the Mitchell Library of the State Library of New South Wales; one of Cawthorne’s daughters left her father’s papers to the library in the 1920s.

The ‘Literarium Diarium’ is a remarkable—if sometimes self-indulgent—informal record of life in and around colonial Adelaide in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, in both word and image, in that Cawthorne was not only a writer but also a watercolourist, and many of the pages are illustrated. Its perspective is that of the littérateur, of the weekend amateur ethnographer; the diary has been recognised as one of the best

¹ ‘Literarium Diarium’, 27 February 1843.
records of everyday contact between the Kaurna people of the
Adelaide Plains and the colonists that we have. This is his
account of the public hanging of Wira Maldira in 1845, a Port
Lincoln man convicted of murder:

Alas, I must tell you a mournful tale—the retrial of human
woe. This morning justice demanded the fulfillment of his
decree passed a few days ago on the body of a Port Lincoln
native for the murder of a Mr Stubbs. He was hung. This
morning at 8 o’clock he marched out to the scaffold and in a
few minutes was hurried into eternity. Where is his soul?! I
did not go to see this heart-rending spectacle and oh how was
I not shocked to see men and boys running actually to see this
sad spectacle, as if to an Exhibition. Not only these, women
went also where are their finer feelings? Oh ye
Englishwomen—all seemed quite delighted with what they
were going to see or had seen. Instead (as I expected) of
seeing the females melt into tears, Alas! laughs resounded
from their mouths. Instead of the men turning away with real
sorrow, Alas! Swearing, nonsensical remarks and ribaldry
formed their conversation. The boys and girls of course
followed the elders example. Oh how it shocked my
sensibility—to think that they were no more impressed at
what they had seen than it been viewing Punch and Judy
played. Here is an example that passed before my own
observation—‘Well Jack’ said an inhuman fellow to a lad, ‘How
did he go off?’ ‘Oh pretty well’ replied the Brute, ‘Did not
make much of it’. Oh, I thought, I wonder how you would ‘go
off if placed in the same situation—you unfeeling wretch. I can
assure you I feel, I think a good deal on such solemn
occasions, but unfortunately I am so [distracted], I mean my
attention, that I can hardly recollect any of the many thoughts
and reflections that arose in my mind during the day. Alas
me—eight horse Police were there with drawn swords, besides
crowds of unfeeling spectators, children the most. O dreadful,
may I always profit by such occurrences. May it be the means of estranging me more from the world and all its vanities. May it lead me to contemplate a future existence and prepare for eternity. May the effects be the same on all mankind. Could] see the jail from our upstairs windows.²

Cawthorne later records this fascinating conversation about capital punishment with some of his Kaurna acquaintances:

We were talking about hanging the blacks, ‘Yes’, says one, ‘you lanty [plenty] hang black fellow, at big house (jail) but’, he said, blackfellow no kick, black fellow go so’ and here he shut his eyes and stood still, imitating the calmness which the native maintained when he was hung. ‘Another white fellow’, he continued with contempt, ‘lanty go so’ and here he jumped about, ‘lanty kicked policeman’ (this is true) ‘lanty cry’, and here they all mimed and then burst out in laughter at the cowardice of the white man. I could not help laughing too to see the grimaces of the fellows and the contempt shown for the white men. [But those] poor devils were not hung outright, the rope gave way or something, I was not in the colony at the time. Well I have spun you a long bad yam. Forgive the same. Read it or not.³

Cawthorne’s diary has been a profitable source for a number of scholars over the last two or three decades: to name but three: the art historian John Tregenza, the history of education scholar Kay Whitehead and the historian of Indigenous culture Robert Foster. A browse will find comments on public drunkenness;⁴

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² ‘Literarium Diarium’, 1 August 1843.
³ ‘Literarium Diarium’, 2 November 1843.
⁴ ‘Literarium Diarium’, 29 January 1843.
dingo-hunting; Adelaide’s ‘bad women’; the fact that Adelaide is called ‘Town’; slums; the quality of Torrens water (‘dreadful’); drunken whalers on a spree; catching fish and yabbies in the Torrens—and cockles, Cawthorne claims.

While the diary is of considerable importance for its representation of the day-to-day minutiae of Adelaide life in the 1840s and 1850s, it is also remarkably revealing of the private thoughts and feelings of a young man on the fringes of lower middle class society in Adelaide. He speaks about his routine life, his ambitions, his family, his drunken and profligate father, his marriage and his friendships. Furthermore, the diary’s self-reflexivity is an obvious and sometimes disconcerting feature; twenty-first century readers will wonder about his motivation for recording intimate information about such complex subjects as his obsessions with very young women; we certainly wonder if he knew that one day his scribblings would be read.

Cawthorne’s diary offers opportunities to note how a young emigrant from South Africa set about the complex business of identity construction in the first decade of the South Australian colony’s existence. His writing describes a three-decade personal

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5 ‘Literarium Diarium’, 18 April 1843.
6 ‘Literarium Diarium’, 11 August 1843.
7 ‘Literarium Diarium’, 19 May 1843.
8 ‘Literarium Diarium’, 23 May 1843.
10 ‘Literarium Diarium’, 26 September 1843.
discussion of his evolving sense of his gendered, professional and class-based identity from within an impoverished and mostly dysfunctional Victorian family, set against the broader political, racial and colonial structures in which professional, social and kinship relations were implicated. His writing is further informed by his ambition to transform himself from impoverished schoolteacher into gentleman artist, ethnographer, collector, writer and littérateur, at which he enjoyed only modest success.