

SUNIL BADAMI

Tony Moore, *Dancing with Empty Pockets: Australia's Bohemians*

Pier 9 Books, 2012, 378pp pb

ISBN 9781741961447, RRP \$29.99

“Australian history,” quipped Mark Twain, “is almost always picturesque; indeed, it is so curious and strange, that it is itself the chiefest novelty the country has to offer, and so it pushes the other novelties into second and third place. It does not read like history, but like the most beautiful lies. And all of a fresh new sort, no mouldy old stale ones. It is full of surprises, and adventures, and incongruities, and contradictions, and incredibilities; but they are all true, they all happened.”

He could have been talking about Australia’s rich and varied counter-cultures, from Marcus Clarke’s Victorian bohemia to *the Chaser* – and the mythologies they wove around themselves. Australia has had a rich and colourful bohemian history since its inspiration by Henri Murger’s *Scènes de la vie de Bohème*, set in Paris’s heady Latin Quarter in the 1840s (later the inspiration for Puccini’s opera *La Bohème*).

The impact on Australian culture of legends such as Norman Lindsay, Henry Lawson, Clive James, Germaine Greer, Barry Humphries, Robert Hughes, Richard Neville, Martin Sharp, the Angry Penguins and the Chaser is without doubt, even if, like Australian history, bohemia’s annals read like the most beautiful lies, full of incongruities, and contradictions, and incredibilities.

Despite the many writers involved, bohemian history is a largely oral one, given that “making art was less important than the living of one’s life as art.” As Tony Moore points out in this pacey, chatty, often refreshingly wry survey, “bohemia is in part created in the act of its telling, or more particularly, remembering.”

Still, at least of early twentieth century bohemia, there are surprisingly few written sources: for example, Jack Lindsay’s controversial memoir *The Roaring Twenties*,

about his and his brothers' exploits at fiery Wobbly Betsy Mathias's Café la Bohème in Sydney, draws heavily on his brother Ray's *Letter from Sydney* (privately written more than thirty years later, and even later published by John Arnold). Subsequent accounts, such as Peter Kirkpatrick's excellent *The Seacoast of Bohemia*, to which Moore's book also refers, draw upon both of these, attempting to sift the myth from the truth.

Even then, Lindsay's reminiscences are contentious, with fellow bohos like Deamer, the so-called Queen of Bohemia, resplendent on the cover in all her leopard-pelted glory, dismissing much of it as fabrication. Indeed, while luminaries like Clive James or Robert Hughes may have reminisced about their time on the fringes of the Sydney Push in their own unreliable memoirs, the first definitive history, Annie Coombs's *Sex and Anarchy*, was not published until 1990, long after many of the original members, such as Lilian Roxon or Margaret Fink, had grown old or died. Kenneth Slessor, the Bard of Darlo, could only produce by way of memoir *Bread and Wine*, a compendium of his shorter prose pieces, fifty years after the events described: hardly the basis for reliability.

Like all oral histories – and especially criminal ones from the shady milieus with which many bohemians liked to flirt and from whom they drew inspiration – there's a danger of mythology. And, as Moore points out, every new wave of bohemians enthusiastically mythologises the exploits of their salad days, dismissing those of the generation before them and tut-tutting those of the generations to follow. Those youthful iconoclasts become respectable icons, in the end.

Even if the idea of what bohemia *is* is as fluid as its coastline (Moore calls it a “larrikin carnivalesque”) a number of things are common to many bohemian movements: iconoclasm, drink, urbanity, poverty, egalitarianism, sex and masculinity. But equally, the very bourgeoisness bohemia professes to reject.

Barry Humphries dismissed the Push as “a fraternity of middle-class desperates, journalists, drop-out academics, gamblers and poet *manqués*, and school teachers and art students, who each night after their working hours exchanged their irksome respectability for a little liberating profanity, drunkenness and sex.” Which, given his own notorious reputation and pretensions to British gentry, is saying something.

Henry Lawson, part of *The Bulletin* set who met and drank at Sydney's famed Assembly Hotel (where later the larrikins of *Smith's Weekly* and the Push would also drink), called it "beerhemia;" the Push dubbed it "critical drinking." But "the boys' own bonhomie [of] beerhemia would prove a curse as well as a muse." There were many casualties of this Dionysian lifestyle, among them the darkly brilliant poet Christopher Brennan, who became a derelict alcoholic after being dismissed from Sydney University for (amongst other things) endangering student morals – and, of course, Lawson and, for a while, Humphreys too (now promoting a weight loss program under Dame Edna's guise).

Although early twentieth century bohemia, particularly surrounding country boy J F Archibald at *The Bulletin*, mythologised the "arcadian" bush and its battlers "with a capital B," after the First World War, reflecting Australia's status as the then-most urbanised country in the world, many bohemians began to celebrate the "urban pastoral." As Slessor eulogised of Sydney's William Street:

The dips and molls, with flip and shiny gaze
(death at their elbows, hunger at their heels)
Ranging the pavements of their pasturage;
You find this ugly, I find it lovely .

Given the always difficult relationship between art and commerce, like the mythic Aussie battler, many "hobohemians" (as Deamer dubbed them) were often mired in poverty. Indeed, the larrikinism associated with many bohemians, were not just due to bohemians' readiness to court notoriety and shock society, but drew on the infamous working class larrikin pushes of Sydney and Melbourne's late nineteenth century slums.

While those gangs, like the bodgies, sharpies and punks to follow, appeared more dangerous than they actually were, their rambunctious love of sex, drinking, vulgarity and distaste for authority despite – or because of – wowserish disapproval proved a powerful inspiration for the bohemians who occasionally rubbed shoulders with them. The Sydney Push (itself named after the larrikins) made a hero of the notorious prison escapee Kevin Simmonds; before them, Anne Brennan turned to prostitution; countless others took illicit drugs, procured illegal abortions, joined the Communist Party or protested against apartheid.

As Moore points out, “the paradox of Bohemia ... was the display of a wealth of cultural capital even while monetary capital was lacking.” Just as such youth sub-cultures rejoiced in their sometimes confronting tribal uniforms (wide-brimmed hats, winklepickers, flares, mohawks,), so too did bohemians like the now sadly-forgotten Geoffrey Cumine, resplendent in mismatched velvet clothes, a butterfly tattooed to his face, Madame Lash in her “naked” bodysuit, or Humphries in his dandyish fedora (much less Dame Edna’s specs).

Rejoicing in Strine vernacular and ribald humour, bohemianism paradoxically appealed to both the often marginalised working class – as reflected in the spectacular sales enjoyed by *Smith’s Weekly*, most famous for Stan Cross’s immortal cartoon *Stop larfin’, this is serious!* – as to the educated suburban upper and upper-middle classes which it apparently lampooned – and from which many bohemians came. Clive James is still considered “the kid from Kogarah;” Fountain Lake has provided as much material for Kath and Kim as it Moonee Ponds ever gave inspiration for Dame Edna.

The popularity of the so-called Artists’ Smokes (similar to the bacchanalian Artists’ Balls at which Deamer appeared in *that* leopard skin) gave rise to similar events staged by the upper class. Sunday Reed, scion of the powerful Bailleu family, surrounded herself with artists. Barry Humphries continues to parade the same characters and routines of an Australia he left long ago to expensive seats in packed houses; fund managers and CEOs snap up inner city terraces to enjoy the very “café lifestyle” erased by gentrification (or else they purchase them for their hipster “kipper” kids).

Still, despite the iconoclasm or disdain of each generation, bohemia was passed on from generation to generation, and in families such as the Lindsays, Brennans, Boyds or McCraes from parents to children (Deamer proving the exception, with one of her neglected children, Rosemary, becoming an admired Catholic scholar and member of the Curia): “connections, transmissions and patterns of living often invisible to the historical actors themselves but apparent to the historian who takes the long-term perspective.”

Sex was an integral part of challenging the straitlaced mores of a conformist, conservative society, from Norman Lindsay’s early bacchanals to the free-loving exploits of the Push. However, it was a principally masculine pursuit: while women were expected to sleep with their fellow bohemians, as Moore points out (quoting

Kirkpatrick), many, such as the tragic Anna Brennan or Joy Hester, were vociferously condemned for doing so.

Today, it seems incredible that male Pushites could presume to lecture women about the “correct” orgasm (following the incorrect theories of the mad Wilhelm Reich), leading many, such as Germaine Greer, Lilian Roxon, Wendy Bacon, Eva Cox and others to rightly rebel against the imposition.

But although urbanisation and social mobility, especially by women on the staffs of popular newspapers and magazines meant more inclusion (or, in the case of Sunday Reed, as a factor of wealth and patronage), as Moore notes, Australian bohemianism, long (ahem) rooted in the faintly homoerotic idea of “mateship” has always been, like so much in Australia, from Parliament to the Miles Franklin Award, largely a masculine pursuit, from Clarke’s Yorick Club to *Oz*; *Aunty Jack* to *The Doug Anthony All-Stars*.

But what makes Australian bohemia even more paradoxical is that for all its rejection of authority, how bourgeois and nationalistic it could be. The Jindyworobak movement, which sought to promote Indigenous Australian culture and ideas and included informal members such as Xavier Herbert and Miles Franklin, was inspired in part by the fascist Australia First editor P.R. “Inky” Stephens (who revered Aboriginals as much as he detested the British). Little magazines such as *Meanjin* or this very journal, which sold mainly to writers, artists and academics, celebrated and promoted Australian culture, artists, writers – and legends, just as *The Bulletin* and *Smith’s Weekly* had in the decades before. Yes, the ockerism of Les Patterson may sound mocking, but if you listen closer, there’s a note of fondness (and perhaps, commercial consideration).

But interestingly, avant-garde journals such as *Southerly* or *Meanjin* also received support – if only support-in-kind – from universities, reinforcing their upper and middle-class contexts, even as they reflected or refracted them: “bohemia first emerged as the other face of the bourgeoisie.”

As Moore points out, what made Australia ripe for bohemia was its relative homogeneity, conservatism and conformity: “Bohemia first emerged as a way young creative people might deal with the problems of cultural atrophy and exclusion, as a

strategy to dislodge an incumbent older generation and win public space for themselves and new aesthetics.”

But now, he asks, “is bohemianism still a meaningful way of life for artists in a postmodern culture where ironic self-reflexivity about commodification [is] widespread and the performance of authenticity, transgression, cosmopolitanism, creativity and identity play [are] available to all?”

Moore suggests that although “some postmodern scholars [a]re confident that their generation had discredited the idea of the avant-garde and bohemia, they protest too much” – especially given the slow, inexorable decline of pomo, even in the humanities faculties that still cling to it.

While he may be right to a degree that “Australia’s current utilitarian political and corporate climate over-regulation and the bureaucratisation of the arts is as much a menace as parsimony for creative workers and dreamers,” the reality might be even more prosaic: money.

After all, are hipsters living in expensive inner-city warehouse conversions bought by their North Shore parents really bohemians, or just affecting the pose? With the increasing amateurisation – and concomitant “long tail” (as Ewan Morrison called it at the Edinburgh Festival a few years ago) of lowering income – of art production, even as its distribution through media conglomerates like Apple, Amazon or Google becomes bigger and bigger business, how can bohemians survive in the modern age? In an age where your demographic information is used to target advertising on your Facebook page, how individual can you be? If Tom Lehrer once said that satire was rendered redundant when Kissinger was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, what kind of joke does Tony Abbott making himself Minister for Indigenous Affairs and Women – even as these portfolios suffer the biggest budget cuts – make?

But these are old laments: “We were a true bohemia, not poseurs as they are now,” declared Deamer of beatniks. “Something a little too calculating, a little too prudent, a little commercial has corroded the joie de vivre,” said Slessor ruefully in 1965 of Kings Cross. Forty years after the sixties, Sydney Push artist Jan Cork lamented: “The world is so cutthroat now, there’s no room for bohemians.” One can almost hear Gen Y hipsters shaking their heads over their skim soy half-n-half de-caf wattleseed lattes as they dismiss Gen Z.

Still, as Moore argues, it's exactly this that promises, despite the many obstacles and distractions, future generations of bohemians:

The long years of cultural conservatism under John Howard, the narrow managerial materialism of Labor's new generation of leaders, and the determination of old commercial media oligopolies to resist change suggest that there is still a place for bohemian dissent and its quest for autonomy in the twenty-first century.

As long as capitalism's promises of freedom continue to be frustrated by its other demands for work discipline, social order and sovereignty of market forces, there will be young rebels who find identity and advantage in Murger's romantic myth.

Plus ça change, indeed. Lilian Roxon once squatted in the infamous derelict artists' colony Buggery Barn in the 1960s, so named when Donald Friend and Peter Finch stayed there in the 1930s, because it was assumed that if you were an artist, you had to be a poofter. And as the Abbott Government has revealed in only a few months, there was never any treaty signed to end the culture wars – conflicts that can only demand resistance.

Moore, the Director of Monash University's National Centre for Australian Studies, has long been interested in bohemia, from his ABC radio documentary *Bohemian Rhapsody*, to his doctoral thesis, *Australia's Bohemian Tradition*, which formed the basis of this book. We can't get enough: other writers, such as Ian Britain, author of *Once An Australian: Journeys with Barry Humphries, Clive James, Germaine Greer and Robert Hughes*, Chris Mikul, author of *The Eccentropaedia* or James Conway of the Strange Flowers blog, have also written extensively about bohemians and ABC TV has commissioned a documentary by Moore on the subject.

Given its range and breadth, Moore's book can be forgiven for occasional lapses. While it cannot explore in as much depth or fine detail particular movements as books like *The Seacoast of Bohemia* or *Sex and Anarchy* have, the final chapter, *Boho to Pomo*, which covers a huge intergenerational span of 32 years (from punk to cyberpunk, pop art to pop music and everything in-between), seems cursory in comparison to the expansive surveys of the preceding chapters, which offer a pacey, chatty, often refreshingly wry survey of each new "spell", especially given the sparkle, enthusiasm and forthrightness of Moore's writing – at times novelistic, painting evocative portraits of many of its subjects: "a handsome young man, also paint-stained, was observed daubing away in his studio enjoying a careless existence

– eating when he felt like it and working all hours as the mood took him. Dressed anyhow, with wisps of long hair hanging over his forehead and a cigarette forever drooping from his mouth, Charles Conder looked the embodiment of one of the heroes of his reading at the time – *La Vie de Bohème*.” Perhaps distance can provide greater vision, no matter how spangled it becomes in the re-telling.

Moreover, the comprehensive bibliography and notes promise a wealth of further reading for the curious wishing to explore bohemia’s coastline and interior a little further (which they can do at the University of Technology, Sydney’s excellent Lindsay Collection, which boasts one of the largest such assemblies of bohemiana available to the public).

What *Dancing with Empty Pockets* offers, in addition to the memoirs and previous histories of different Australian counter-cultures is a lively, engaging and clear-eyed analysis of what bohemia was or what it meant at different times, the things that distinguished each movement from each other and contemporaneous society, and the things that have united them throughout history, offering the same surprising, incongruous, contradictory and incredible links between them (just as Moore notes how Australian bohemia, seemingly disconnected from the cultural cringe and Australian ugliness about it, contextualised itself within greater worldwide movements, such as Dadaism or hippydom).

As Schopenhauer might have said, all ideas pass through three stages. First, they’re ridiculed. Second, violently opposed. Third, accepted as being self-evident. Just as former young turks like Nick Cave, Peter Garrett, Reg Mombassa or the *All-Stars*’ Richard Feidler have become “national institutions” or once fervent anti-establishmentarians such as Richard Walsh, Steve Vizard or Meredith Burgmann became pillars of society (indeed, self-styled “public intellectual” Bob Carr could not hide his delight at being invited by Kissinger to the secretive and oxymoronic Bohemian Grove camp outside San Francisco, membership of which is overwhelmingly rich, powerful, Republicans).

Only Germaine Greer continues to delight by stirring the pot on anything from the desirability of young boys to the Prime Minister’s arse.

Of course, the greatest paradox of bohemia is that it’s like that old *Far Side* cartoon: a convention of individualists, clubbing together against the rest of society.

Those most dedicated to the performance of it did the least lasting work (see Deamer, Cumine, Darcy Waters *et al*). Indeed, those who made the biggest cultural contributions were often those on the fringes of the fringes: James on the edges of the Push, Slessor on the edge of the I Felici, or all those other foreign or country or suburban outsiders like Roxon, Archibald or James who somehow became the centres of their own larrikin carnivals. The best art is always made by those on the outside looking in. Perhaps that's the inadvertent irony of the tyranny of distance: that it produces so many fascinating and creative people, celebrated in this important and enjoyable book.

As Ellis eulogised of the Push:

To an outsider, and many of us were outside the Push, unable because of our tentative personalities to break through the strong, royal curtain into their loving affection, they loomed as Homeric giants, whose life was one long bland adventure, night after night, party after party, race meeting after poker session and tragic love after tragic love, following on the minute's need or desire, following it for its own sake, with no ulterior goal in view, following their own soul's odyssey through all its incarnations with granite amusement, delivering their papers on sex and death and Reich and Christ and Camus and Phar Lap, arguing and drinking far into the night, taking around the hat for incidental abortions, offering no rebuff to anyone who showed up at midnight and wanted to sleep on the floor, but calmly putting up with him for as long as he wanted to stay, conducting their ritual contests, inventing savage games, and having their parties, parties, parties, all the parties I missed.

As Deamer observed, paraphrasing Twain, the truth *is* stranger than fiction, and often much duller. "We did it all!" she proclaimed in her memoir (originally titled, of course, *The Golden Decade*). Not quite, perhaps, on both counts, but though they may have danced with empty pockets, what music Australian bohos made, its melody resounding from these pages!