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Abstract

William Anderson Cawthorne (1824-1897) was a remarkable Australian: a teacher, diarist, poet, ethnographer, biographer, traveller, artist and, towards the end of his life, businessman. He kept a detailed diary from 1842 until the 1870s which contains some of the most vivid writing we have about daily life in colonial Adelaide and also about the Kaurra people of the region. He completed hundreds of watercolours of colonial life, many of them representing the Kaurra. He published a number of pieces in the Adelaide papers, some of the liveliest colonial travel writing about the colony. He became one of the best-known educators in South Australia, running schools with his mother and (for a while) was principal of Putteney Grammar.

Cawthorne published one of the first poems to represent an Aborigina! Dreaming, 'The Legend of Kuperee: or, the Red Kangaroo' in 1858. He c. 1870 published one of the first children's books in Australia to represent indigenous flora and fauna. He wrote a quicky biography called Mengo, the Mineralogist, in 1854 he also wrote one of the earliest works of fiction attempted in the colony. The Kangaroo Islanders, which first appeared in serial form in The Illustrated Melbourne Post from 1865-6. It later appeared in book form in 1926, published by Rigbys.

The Kangaroo Islanders presents unique insights into Australia's maritime history, a subject rarely tackled by colonial writers. Among other things, it is a rich repository of nineteenth-century sailors' slang. It is set in 1823 on Kangaroo Island, at that stage the 'Ultima Thule' of the British Empire, and represents the 'Islanders', the sealers and their Aboriginal women who lived there as Robinson Crusoes and Fridays. The plot has some historical significance, as it describes the murder by Indigenous people of a 'Captain Meredith', in reality George Meredith, the son of one of the most powerful of the free settlers in Van Diemen's Land in the 1820s and the brother-in-law of the writer Louisa Anne Meredith. The novel also portrays a number of Indigenous women, mostly from Van Diemen's Land, including Trukaninii's sister Maggerlede, here called 'Bunibalefoot', the representations some of the most detailed and complex in colonial Australian fiction.