

Adrian Mitchell, *The Profelist: The Notebooks of Ethan Dibble* (Wakefield Press, 2015)

At the time I agreed to review Adrian Mitchell's *The Profelist* I was unaware of points of connection with my life and work. In 1840, 28 people, including my paternal settler ancestors as well as the 'homicidal camel' referred to in Mitchell's disclaimer 'An admission or two', travelled up the Port River to Adelaide, in the colony of South Australia. It was the first European passenger vessel small enough to do so. The camel caused explorer John Horrocks's death and was put down. It's quite a yarn. In addition, Mitchell and I share an interest in Marcus Clarke, George Coppin, Adam Lindsay Gordon, Henry Kendell and Lola Montez, subjects of my historical novel.

Mitchell's fictional protagonist, Australian artist Ethan Dibble, a barely disguised Samuel Thomas (S.T.) Gill, has a lot to say about these well-known historical figures and about many others: artist George French Angas, colonial governors Eyre, Gawler, Grey, Hindmarsh, Hotham and Lachlan, explorers Burke and Wills, the aforementioned John Horrocks and Captain Strutt [Sturt], surveyor Nathanael Hailes and Henry Ward, aka Captain Thunderbolt. Mitchell uses aliases for many of his characters, each finely pointed with satirical intent. His stated reason, in Gill's case, is the absence of extant diaries and letters.

The novel's plot outlines English Dibble's attempts to make a name and living for himself as a colonial artist, initially in Adelaide. Each chapter of the book begins with a watercolour or pencil sketch by Gill, a structure that suggests rather than resembles the fictional notebook in the subtitle. After it is alleged that his dog has bitten a 'native woman' he is summonsed to court and feels publicly shamed. The case is dismissed but a hand injury prevents Dibble painting. Consequently, he carries debt including legal fees and rent in arrears, and his dog is summarily poisoned. Under duress, he tries desperately to keep ahead of the law – 'a necessary thing, in the abstract' – by fleeing and relaunching his career in the eastern colonies (138). While painting in the Victorian goldfields, he falls in love with an equally pragmatic pianist who travels with him to Sydney. Each new venture follows a similar trajectory.

The novel shows a pleasing symmetry, its narrator drawing attention to Portsmouth as his setting off place and to the convicts incarcerated there in hulks, many of whom end up insolvent and unhappy in Sydney like him. Bankruptcy acts as a marker for the overshooting of immigrant ambitions and with attendant themes: 'The world is carved up by those with the biggest knives and forks' (280).

The 'natives', class anxiety, art and self-knowledge are the main subjects of the novel. Dibble and George Coppin divide the people of Addle-Layed [Adelaide] and the eastern colonies into 'Nobs and Snobs, two sides of the golden guinea' and then he adds a third category: a squatter, 'not up to their mark ... a kind of John Bull in the antipodes (243). He also describes miners, farmers, mechanics and teamsters.

He casts racial aspersions on various groups but in a way that Gill might have considered fair-minded: about Cornishmen, he suggests 'their conversation is not profound' (120); he refers to the 'industrious Chinese' or 'inscrutables' becoming the victims of 'shameful attacks by the Europeans' culminating at Lambing Flat in murder (241-2, 248); he easily sidelines an Irish man as 'full of blarney, of course, but surprisingly good company' (253); he slips into the common nineteenth-century

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stereotypes of Jewish people; he refers to a girl with a 'frankish smile' (12); and he calls Jacky, a 'native' who did odd jobs for Horrocks, 'the real worker' (243). Sketch 14, Gill's 'Native Dignity' (date unknown), brings to the foreground two Indigenous characters in a parody of best dressed citizens, heads thrown back, the man in tails, carrying clay pipe and baton, the woman in tilting picture hat and the top half of a crinoline: 'all the underworks are on display, and so also her bare legs' (261). Dibble admires their insouciance but 'it is the fashion that is burlesqued. They are curiously dignified' (261).

There are many knowledgeable references to visual art and its techniques, in particular those relevant to a silhouette painter with an eye to the main chance:

I might add in a gilded epaulette or some collar buttons on the likeness of a young officer, hint at the neckline of a young beauty – especially when the image was for one of those young officers. Bronzing, we call this kind of embellishment, a touch of gold, or sometimes Chinese white. Just the suggestion, you see, to overcome the flatness of the profile The gentlemen seemed to appreciate a suggestion of rounded bosoms. (18)

Mitchell attempts to capture the consciousness of the observer/artist and his reasonable desire to bring human interest to paintings, to tell a kind of truth missed by competitors – 'little vignettes from ordinary life that spoke of larger truths' – and in the face of so many colonial agendas, to first and foremost make a sale (255).

Written in first-person past tense and a stylish but confiding epistolary style, the narrative revivifies colonial milieus of various places: newly settled Adelaide and its hinterland, Port Phillip Bay/Melbourne, the Victorian and NSW goldfield towns, and Sydney where Dibble seeks his fortune. Rural settings are well described, including the settlers' bewilderment at the inversion of the seasons and the challenges thrown up by their extremes – the muted colourations of land and sky, local politics and idiom.

Mitchell is a fine writer. The narrative offers many lyrical depictions of landscape – for example, of Turon Fields: 'At night the stars pierce the skies like points of ice, hard and glittering in a frosty sky' (235). He represents urban settings with equal authority, including ribald crowds at the theatre, class politics on Collins Street, and conflict between the citified tax collectors and those in newly settled bush with no roads, streetscape or facilities. Apart from some long slow sections set in the goldfields, with little action and a great deal of exposition, *The Profelist* is a lively read. The pace is lively, rollicking even, and Dibble's elegant language is laced with unrelenting humour: 'after three months at sea, three meaningless months ... this flat, forlorn, God-forsaken mosquito-ridden stinky swampland. It does not heave. It does not so much as undulate' (2). Lovers of Laurence Sterne's eighteenth-century comic novel, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Sandy*, will feel quite at home with Dibble. He narrates the voice of a solitary observer, an outsider with a chip on his shoulder, one who gathers gossip in a sly malicious tone that exposes and injustice: 'full of public office. He has a lady friend installed in a cottage' (257, 270).

Particular malice plays out in Mitchell's character Mr Florian Flute, whose 'voice is flutelike and as high as a curate's glittering glasses and inferior chin' (81), and who resembles George French Angus, a rival who apparently attracted Gill's ire, allegedly

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by passing off four of his paintings as his own (257). In the novel, Flute makes fun of Dibble behind his back and snubs him in Sydney. Dibble describes Flute's work as 'lifeless ... Flute is the mortician of nature' (89). This negative portrait of Angas is not the first. Another can be found in Lucy Treloar's debut novel, *Salt Creek* (2015). Nathaniel Hailes, 'one of the lower lights of the colony', also take a hit or two (63).

The choice of a love interest, inspired by a Mrs Gill who reportedly accompanied Lola Montez on the piano and may or may not have been Gill's partner, is fictional and feasible. Mitchell wryly draws Elizabeth as a woman of her time and class. Montez, famous for her spider dance, reputedly performed without underwear, enjoyed opium, owned a lyrebird and a white cockatoo, and once removed her clothes to avoid arrest (206-7). Elizabeth smokes and drinks champagne and is, Dibble says, 'experimenting with opium, if I am any good guess at the perfume' (252). References to Dibble's height suggest that he feels more than socially diminished. Sexual digs and references to venereal disease indicate that he is not entirely faithful to his partner, something he accepts as commonplace, particularly at the diggings.

I felt immediately at home in *The Profelist*, peopled as it is with familiar historical characters, and suffused with aspirational tone and Bohemian mood. Tropes of Melbourne's Yorick Club stories could perhaps have been more differentiated from their sources. I saw connections between Mitchell's Dibble and the 'homicidal' camel: emigrant survivors whose embattled and recalcitrant attitudes precipitated premature deaths. A fictional document in the Postscript concludes Dibble's feisty tale.

The book is another fine production by Wakefield Press, beautifully designed by Stacey Zass. The cover, one of Gill's self-portraits, encapsulates the wiliness and the signs of suffering in the face of adversity and ill health depicted by Mitchell in Dibble.

Dibble's final musing question is ironic as well as rhetorical: 'Is it possible to see who will succeed and who will fail?' (271).

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