Review

Matthew Condon, *Brisbane*, Sydney: New South Press, 2010, ISBN 978 74223 028, 301 pp., \$29.95.

I dare say that most people who pick up this book and note the year of publication (2010) will expect, as I did, to enjoy a little *Schadenfreude* at the expense of an author being spectacularly wrong-footed by history, describing Brisbane in innocent obliviousness to the flood of January 2011, which will dominate people's perceptions of the city for a long time to come. Happily, that expectation is not fulfilled; there are worthier pleasures on offer. With the kind of imaginative prescience that a good novelist can sometimes bring (and perhaps a modicum of luck), Matthew Condon decided to include half a dozen pages on the 1974 flood as it affected him and his family. Coincidentally, his grandmother's house – from which she had to be evacuated – and his own childhood home were in Beck Street, Rosalie, one of the hardest hit and most prominently featured locations in 2011.

Condon's creative talents are very much on show in this book on his home city, as are his skills as a journalist. As with other books in the same New South Press series – Delia Falconer's on Sydney and Kerryn Goldsworthy's (forthcoming) on Adelaide – the publisher's brief was evidently one that encouraged personal reminiscence and reflection, lyrical evocation of places and times, and an imaginative, freewheeling and above all *experiential* approach to the task of 'capturing' the history and character of the city. This is a worthwhile publishing project. Several books (though far fewer than you might expect) have told aspects of the Brisbane story in more and less conventional ways (Helen Gregory's lovely biography of the Brisbane River is one of the latter), and Condon has used these books, and in many cases interviewed the authors in person; however, none has attempted to blend personal memoir, imaginative reconstruction, historical anecdote, journalistic investigation and archival research quite as intricately as Condon does. For readers who know Brisbane, there will be the rewards of recognition – the pleasing shock of a familiar place or time seen from a fresh and unfamiliar personal or generational perspective. For people who don't know the city, and who read the book to find out about it, the rewards may be more mixed. There is some very good writing here. I mentioned the account of the '74 flood, and to that I would add some nicely evocative descriptions of Brisbane light:

If you are born into it, this palette of gentle pinks and oranges at dawn and dusk, the blast white of midday in summer, the lemon luminescence of mid-morning and mid-afternoon, you keep it with you, and measure all other light by it. If you live away from it, then step back into it, it is the first thing that tells you you're home. You might find other places that come close to it – the Mediterranean, for example – but nothing seems to replicate its vibrancy, nor its converse delicacy. (pp. 52–53)

Condon also does conversations with his four-year-old son rather well. I particularly enjoyed a longish section towards the end of the book where he decides to give a proper answer to the boy's question, 'Where did the city come from?' and manages several pages of quite lucid and well-pitched explanation, punctuated by the boy's obliging but essentially uncomprehending responses. It's very funny, very appealing and not at all sentimental.

Condon does not always escape the trap of sentimentality, however, and its object is himself. The book begins with the sentence, 'Then one day the boy started building a replica of his own city under the house.' 'Then' strikes me as a literary affectation, but the anonymous third-person 'boy' perspective – it is, of course, the author as a boy – is then sustained for eight pages, and returns at several points through the rest of the book. I'm sure there's some idea behind it about acknowledging the partial 'otherness' of one's childhood self, but I find the effect of it cloying and irritating. There is a kind of honesty about an 'I', which thankfully Condon uses for most of the book, and which is lost in the wash of self-affection that flows from, and over, the third-person 'boy'.

The Brisbane replica the boy is building is part of another very 'literary' strategy Condon uses to displace objective chronologies and thematics with an intensely subjective relationship to the city in which he grew up. More than other Australian cities, he implies, Brisbane requires you to construct and inhabit your own personal city of the mind, because – as David Malouf has so memorably and persuasively said – Brisbane is actually harder to grasp than other cities, even larger ones. In Malouf's version – to which Condon graciously defers – this is mainly a matter of spatial ambiguities and paradoxes, many of them caused by the confusing and disorienting presence of the multi-directional river; but there are analogous social, cultural and political peculiarities and paradoxes about Brisbane too, and Condon canvasses some of these – Bjelke-Petersen, Fitzgerald, Cloudland, the City Hall refurbishment – in the second half of the book.

A physical marker provides him with an organising trope for the book: the granite obelisk on North Quay that marks the spot, ostensibly, where the explorer John Oxley 'landing to look for water discovered the site of this city'. Like Condon, I've been seeing it all my life; unlike Condon, I've never found that inscription especially puzzling, though in common with most of the population I suppose I'd now regard 'discovered' as a bit *terra nullius* – much as you'd expect from the 1920s. But what a weight of significance hangs on that word 'ostensibly'! The whole book is framed as a kind of quest narrative for the true site of Oxley's landing, in which Condon heads on, or off, or down, or out – 'heading' is his default mode of locomotion, nearly always in an annoying present tense – in a vain search for certainty as to whether this was in fact the true site, or whether the landing occurred a couple of kilometres upstream. I was never persuaded that it mattered much, and the suggestion that this uncertainty constitutes a kind of spiritual emptiness at the heart of Brisbane is surely a bit of a stretch.

In any case, Condon himself sometimes seems quite certain about the alternative location up near the old Milton Tennis Complex site, to the point where he seems, obscurely, to be accusing Francis Cumbræ-Stewart, the university law professor and

local historian partly responsible for selecting the North Quay site in the 1920s, of some kind of self-serving duplicity or wilful blindness in interpreting Oxley's diaries. Condon seems to need antagonists to animate his quest, and the hapless Cumbrae-Stewart and his wife Zina play that role throughout the book: their crime seems to have been that they were a bit above themselves. The 'attitude' (in the hip, modern sense) that is generated by this need for windmills to tilt against (indeed the Windmill itself – the convict-built one on Wickham Terrace – is another such; its crime is that it was once a treadmill) permeates much of the book, and can grate nearly as much as the self-directed sentimentality of the boy. I leave aside crass Americanisms like 'gotten', 'someplace else' and the adverbial 'likely' (though I do wish the editor hadn't).

Brisbane, then is a bit of a curate's egg, good in parts. Condon is a lively, sometimes lyrical writer and a curious jackdaw (I suppose I'd better say bower bird) as a researcher. But the book as a whole is too much of a collage: a topical issue here, an *aperçu* there, a mini-biography somewhere else; and too many unedited passages of interview transcript. It's all repetitively 'troped' together with the ersatz quest for the True Landing Place, which is not really a satisfactory substitute for a coherent narrative. For all that, I quite enjoyed reading it, and it is a delightfully compact little hardback, beautifully bound with a nice image of a dilapidated pier (annoyingly unidentified) on the dustjacket. It's not well proofed – there are many misprints – and the upper-case 'I' is used for the numeral '1' throughout. I'm not sure of the book's market potential, but if it encourages more people to view the Oxley obelisk in its present location, the municipal traffic authorities will be alarmed.

– Patrick Buckridge