

# Memories of the Wildman

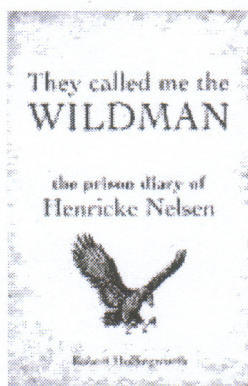
FICTION/HISTORY

**THEY CALLED ME THE WILDMAN: The Prison Diary of Henricke Nelsen.** By Robert Hollingworth. Pier 9. 212pp. \$29.95.

*Revison:* **PETER PIERCE**

Of stories of vanishing in Australia, there seems to be no end. Whether they poignantly involve actual and imagined lost children, or individuals supposedly captured by Aborigines (the fabled "White Woman of Gippsland", or the meretricious Eliza Fraser), or adopted by them (William Buckley), or explorers come to grief (Leichhardt at the head of the queue), or those murdered but never found (Peter Falconio among many), the phenomenon is peculiarly and brutally Australian. This is not only a country of lost children, but a land of unmarked graves. However, the disappearance from colonial Victorian society that is the subject of Robert Hollingworth's *They Called Me The Wildman: The Prison Diary of Henricke Nelsen*, is wilful, and not fatal.

Having found a cave for himself, as many Australians in novels have done, the Swedish-born Nelsen, who had come to this country in 1861, lived peacefully and more or less self-sufficiently in the Tallarook Ranges in northern Victoria. Proverbially this is a place where things are "crook", but Nelsen was contented, finding time for reflection on the



European world that he had left behind, and on the developing colonial society, and its disappointments for him in work and love, as he had observed and experienced them. Eventually apprehended in 1880, after 14 years on his own, and on the testimony of a vengeful stockman, woods". Nelsen, was jailed for six months for vagrancy. In that time, the main item of news from the outside world was of the end of Ned Kelly.

*They Called Me The Wildman* is a fictional-

ised account of Nelsen's life, principally in the form of his prison diary. However, Hollingworth's afterword assures us, weightily, that "Nelson's prison record is held at the Public Records Office of Victoria, Reg. No. 18398, and is on the very last page of that thick leather-bound volume".

Once set free, the "Wildman of Tallarook" vanished once more, as - by the way - did some rescued lost children. Perhaps he is, as Hollingworth reckons, the Henry Nelson who died in November 1890 of "a malignant disease of the stomach".

The book begins with an epigraph from Thoreau ("I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately ...") and a deposition from Nelsen: "I Henricke Nelsen lately of the Tallarooks do hereby take it upon myself to tell of all that happened on the mountain." But before that, he reverts to his Swedish childhood, and to the various chances by which he came to another hemisphere. He laments both the newspaper account of him as having "gone wild like a dingo dog", and the fact that "after his apprehension "my days of Peace and Solitude were nearly gone".

Dispiriting news reaches him intermittently from his homeland, for instance of the death of his 45-year-old mother in childbirth. His Australian memories include stock material: mile-wide tides of flame in a bush fire, the gold rushes, a vain attempt at finding work with Howitt (who led the search that found the bodies of Burke and Wills), the deaths of bushrangers Morgan and Kelly.

Nelsen's tale reads as one of those "beautiful lies" that Mark Twain mischievously declared to be the stuff of Australian history. Yet Hollingworth's sympathetic and vivid appropriation of the story, his gift for making it seem both the tale of an emigrant, an outsider, and of one who immersed himself more thoroughly than most in the natural world of Australia is an engaging and persuasive exercise in fact cum fiction. How that world accommodates the desire for solitude, and how it is also - as Lawson said "nurse and tutor of eccentric minds" - is part of Hollingworth's revelation.

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