

# Out of the wilderness

A gifted storyteller gives voice to the loner known as Victoria's Wildman.

## FICTION

**They Called Me The Wildman: The Prison Diary Of Henricke Nelsen**  
By Robert Hollingworth  
Pier 9, 205pp hardback, \$29.95  
Reviewed by David Messer

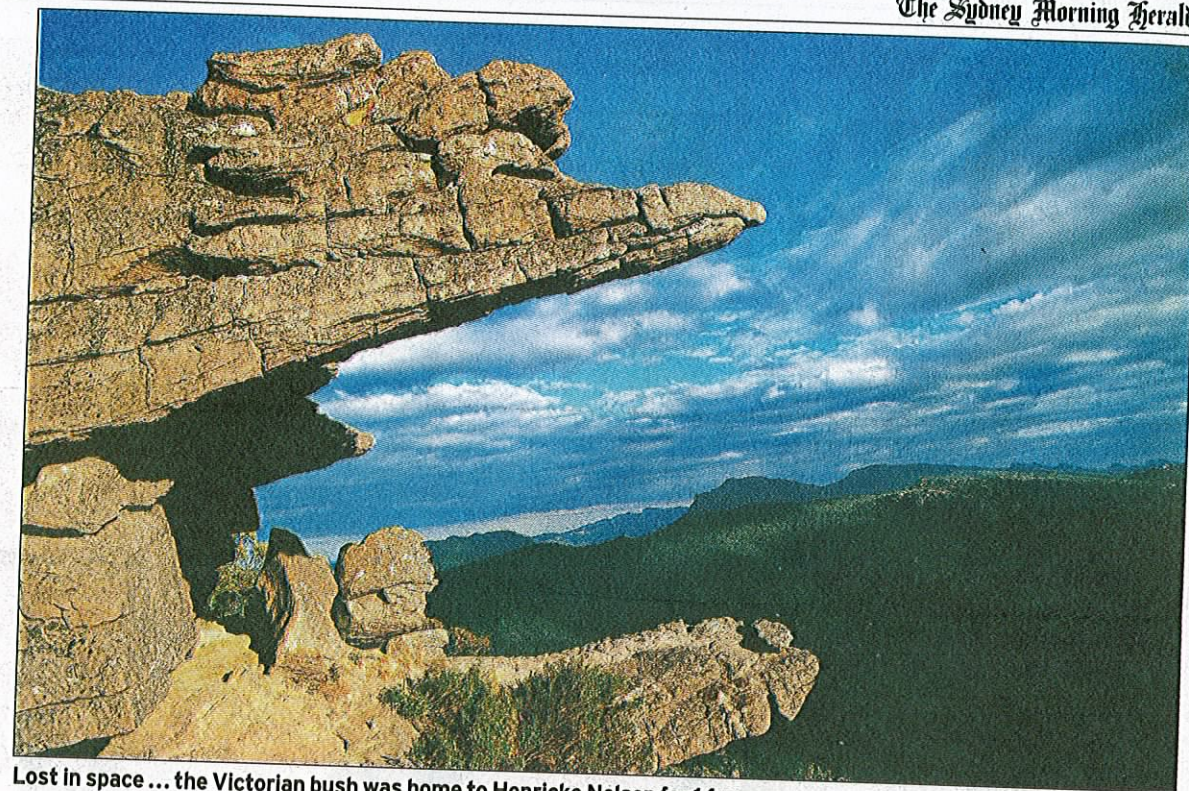
VICTORIAN artist and writer Robert Hollingworth's new book is many things: a historical record; a piece of fiction; a technically adroit replication of a past literary style; a study of nature; and a semi-philosophical meditation on life. Readers, however, should not be alarmed by this multiplicity. It doesn't get in the way of a good story and is essential to the purpose of the book.

The many facets of *They Called Me The Wildman* should also come as no surprise to those familiar with Hollingworth. While not exactly a renaissance man, he has several prodigious talents. These days the media is awash with celebrities spinning off lucrative sidelines thanks to their bankable fame. Cricketers' "write" newspaper

columns, radio personalities make guest appearances on TV programs and it seems that just about everyone has at least one book in them.

But it is rare to find someone like Hollingworth who is genuinely accomplished in more than one field. He has a deep love and expert knowledge of the land, particularly the parts of Victoria he grew up in and the Tallarook Ranges where he sometimes resides and where this book is set. He is best known as a visual artist, something he came to relatively late in life but in which he has established an impressive body of work. He has also long practised as a writer, principally (but not exclusively) as an essayist. More recently his longer works include the memoir *Nature Boy*, published in 2004, and now this one of historical fiction.

Hollingworth has chosen well for his subject. The Wildman of the title, Henricke Nelsen, really did exist in the 1860s, though his tale is exotic enough to be worthy of fiction. Nelsen, originally a Swede, emigrated first to England, then Melbourne, where he lived for a period before going bush, living alone in the Tallarook Ranges for 14 years. Here, with only occasional contact with others, he resided in an ingeniously crafted underground



Lost in space ... the Victorian bush was home to Henricke Nelsen for 14 years.

dwelling. Gradually, though, rumours of the "wildman" spread, the Victorian press creating a kind of hysterical paranoia, until the authorities dispatched the police to apprehend Nelsen on a charge of vagrancy. He was caught, charged, found guilty and sentenced to six months' jail, which he served.

Inspired by the prison diary kept by the convict Owen Suffolk a few years earlier in Geelong jail, which was serialised in the *Australasian* newspaper in 1967, Hollingworth has created an imaginary memoir written during Nelsen's time in jail. This is not a complete flight of fancy, however. Nelsen was well-educated enough to have written such a thing. Moreover, many of the events and characters in the book have been derived from historical sources, Hollingworth having meticulously scoured jail

records, contemporary newspaper accounts and so forth.

In terms of literary style, Hollingworth has similarly stayed as true to the past as possible. Nelsen's prose has a ring of authenticity, complete with the odd spelling mistake and structural archaism (though not enough to distract the reader). In the same way, Hollingworth resists the temptation to voice things that Nelsen would not have, even at the expense of a juicier story. It's clear, for instance, that Nelsen alludes to a sexual relationship with Catherine Rushall, yet Nelsen - with a modesty befitting the time - never admits it explicitly.

Where Hollingworth does venture most into fiction, or at least into the area of speculation, is in the questions of why Nelsen chose to live alone in the bush for so long and

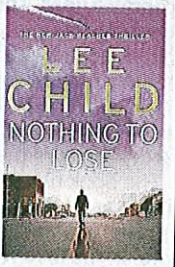
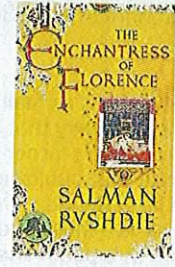
what effect this might have had on him. The subtleties of the answers he imagines take this book beyond both history and fiction.

The "why" is more straightforward than the what. Nelsen's self-removal from human society is precipitated by a particular upbringing, a series of personal crises and the influence of the revolutionary ideas of thinkers such as Henry Thoreau and Charles Darwin. The "what" is more complex. Nelsen is not some simple back-to-nature enthusiast. He has a great fondness for the bush but this is tempered by an ambivalence regarding his place in it as a non-native interloper. In the process of exploring this question, Hollingworth conducts an internal debate relevant not only to the 19th century but also the 21st.



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