

Life in the past lane

Peter Conrad is Tasmanian. For most of his life he probably hasn't liked being described this way. Tasmania was the ultimate nowhere from which to escape: "An offshore island off the shore of an offshore continent." As a clever young man of twenty he had no hesitation in heading for Europe, burning all that he could not fit into two tea-chests, "the discarded first draft of a person". But life can be more persistent than art, and Conrad at forty became sufficiently curious about that island, and about young Conrad, to return to explore and write what should be a classic of Australian rediscovery literature, *Down Home* (Chatto & Windus, \$29.95).

Grown-up Conrad is a cultural analyst who teaches English at Oxford. He writes wonderfully, with a keen eye for what is natural as well as what has been "culturally" imposed, and gives the feeling that there is so much he has to say that he is rarely straining for effect. The unexpected history of the place also comes alive, sometimes with a single sentence. "Tasmania was a Gothic society." And the settlers' response to this psychic prison? Grecian architecture.

The book adds immeasurably to my interest in Tasmania. It also most poignantly captures a dilemma which still stirs some Australians and New Zealanders: the compulsion to leave the place one has called "home", and the impossibility of making this departure a clean or final break.

For early Chinese migrants to Australia, the idea of "settling" was not attractive. They retained close links with China, often building relatively prestigious houses there as a focus for their dreams of returning.

Helene Chung is fourth-generation Australian-Chinese. She was growing up in Tasmania at much the same time as Conrad. Her book *Shouting From China* (Penguin, \$14.99) is less about Tasmania than it is about being Chinese in Australia, and about being "overseas Chinese" in China. From 1983 to 1986 Chung was the ABC's foreign correspondent based in Beijing. Her account of those years is ballast to current romantic

idealizations of that vast, complex country.

Chung's China is often dirty, impoverished, inefficient and crushing of individual initiative. Yet she powerfully conveys the rewards of living an intense lifestyle as a foreign correspondent in such a relatively cut-off city, as well as difficulties which included having to shout her news down the line to Sydney — when she could get a line.

Chung is not a great prose writer, but she has a story worth telling and an intelligent sense of what will be of interest to non-specialist readers.

I guess it would be almost too much to expect the golden-throated Joan Baez to be able to write as well as she can sing. But she, too, has a story to tell. *A Voice to Sing With* (Century, \$29.95) will be of most interest to those who spent their passionate teenage years crooning along with Joanie as she mourned true love in one guise or another. There is some of that in the memoir too, true love having stepped up in the boots of Bob Dylan and again in the shoes of activist David Harris. But there is more rejoicing than mourning.

Mrs Samuel Taylor Coleridge has given me much pleasure, a small plump woman coming alive down almost two centuries, thanks to the exceptional skills of her biographer, Molly Lefebure. The title of the biography is somewhat silly. Anything called *The Bondage of Love* (Gollancz, \$17.95) gets off to a bad start. But it immediately recovers and stays well on course.

Coleridge (he of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*) was a wild and wildly self-absorbed man who was in bondage not to love but to opium. Sarah, his wife, fell in love with his brilliance and had to learn to put up with his illnesses, poverty, absences, slanders, extra-marital infatuations, and the self-justifying sentimentalities and distortions which accompany addictions of any kind. Although Molly Lefebure writes in a some-

WHAT'S MORE RIVETING? TELLING TALES ON YOURSELF OR SOMEONE ELSE DOING IT FOR YOU?

what archaic style, it is obviously so natural to her that she does it with great verve. She is highly attentive to her subject and to the slurs which the Wordsworth and literary history have cast upon Mrs C. She rights those slurs with conviction and sets this marriage within a historical frame which offers parallels to our own social upheaval and change.

An even more explicit dialogue between past and present is offered by Neil Bartlett in *Who Was That Man?* (Serpent's Tail,

\$26.95). It is a most stylish portrait of Oscar Wilde, and of contemporary gay London, and his erudition and wit lift this book almost to the level of spectacle. Good for Neil; great for Oscar.

Dorothy Parker must have been a frightful subject to tackle for a biographer. She left no correspondence, memorabilia or private papers. Or none was found. Marion Meade seems to have suffered in the writing of *Dorothy Parker: What Fresh Hell is This?* (Heinemann, \$35). She has certainly been diligent, but the book rarely does more than record. It could serve as a caution to aspiring Dorothys, but it is doubtful they would read it.

Sylvia Plath (Chatto & Windus, \$36.95) is potentially as depressing, but is not. Linda Wagner-Martin is charged with enthusiasm for her subject, and this colours her reading of Plath's work, as well as her understanding of the demons which drove that brilliant young poet and writer to put her head in a gas oven, having laid down cups of milk at the bedsides of her two children.

Plath died at the age of thirty, in 1963, when poet was still a masculine noun and when ambitious women largely cultivated male friends, recognising that women "had no power to help you in any important way". Had she been born ten years later, had she been able to survive ten years longer, her story and our literary history might have been different. Stephanie Dowrick