



Charles Conder: The Last Bohemian (Miegunyah Series 2)

Ann Galbally

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Toulouse-Lautrec made an oil study of Conder in evening dress and gave it to him. Thinly but exquisitely painted on cardboard, he has captured the essence of Conder's attraction: the hooded, sleepy eyes, the pose at once assertive but relaxed and the suggestion, in the full lips and introverted green eyes, of sensual pleasures anticipated and recalled. Lautrec has immortalised him as l'homme sensuel. Charles Conder was one of the youngest, most original and most talented members of the Heidelberg School of impressionist painters - and one of the few to achieve a lasting reputation outside Australia. In London his works hang in the Tate and National Portrait galleries and the Victoria and Albert Museum. Conder studied in Sydney and joined Julian Ashton's circle. At Bondi and Coogee he painted with Tom Roberts, who invited him to Melbourne. There he joined the artists' camps at Mentone and Box Hill, became a student of Frederick McCubbin and was a major contributor to the famous 9 X 5 Exhibition in 1889. As in Sydney, his carefree charm and delicate, witty paintings endeared him to literary and artistic circles. Paris beckoned early, and he soon fell in with the fin de siecle generation led by Oscar Wilde, Toulouse-Lautrec and Aubrey Beardsley. He embraced Bohemia, was forever in debt, worked erratically but unceasingly and lived as if there were no tomorrow. Although rescued from poverty by marriage to a wealthy Canadian widow, his bohemian past called in its account. He descended into syphilitic madness and was dead before the age of forty. Conder's was a beguiling, charmed, desperate life. He was handsome and rakish and sociable - sensitive to people and place, and extraordinarily talented. So why has he been so long neglected? If he was waiting for the right biographer, Conder's patience has been vindicated. Ann Galbally investigates her subject with scholarly rigour and writes with lightness of touch and with passion. She writes feelingly of his sad decline but is never maudlin.

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