

# Alan Moorehead

## A Rediscovery

Ann Moyal introduces her biography of Alan Moorehead, the first in a new series of Australian lives being published by the National Library

Sometimes it is one's good fortune to meet, even briefly, a memorable character who stamps himself upon one's mind. Such a one, for me, was Alan Moorehead, the distinguished Australian author and expatriate whom I met in 1965 at an intimate small dinner in Canberra with Manning and Dymphna Clark. Writer, world traveller, biographer, essayist, journalist, Moorehead was one of the most successful writers in English of his day. He had first made his name as a renowned war correspondent and writer in World War II, and, having left behind him his own country in 1936, he had settled in the postwar years for an expatriate's life in England and Italy.

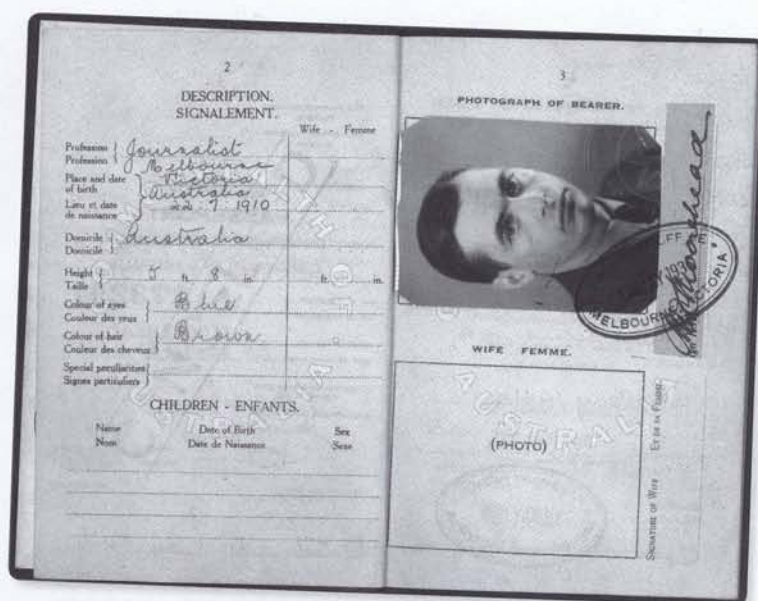
Born in Melbourne in 1910 and educated at Scotch College, with a BA from Melbourne University, he had by the 1960s built a larger reputation than any other Australian writer. The author of the great wartime campaigns of the Western Desert and Europe, *African Trilogy* and *Eclipse*, biographer of Montgomery and Churchill, a writer of some 21 best-selling books, and one of the major travel writers of his times, Moorehead was a household name in Britain, widely renowned in the USA for his essays in the *New Yorker*, and commanded world audiences through translations of his work into French, German, Dutch, Portuguese, Spanish, Hebrew, Egyptian, Arabic and Japanese.

Yet while Alan Moorehead's name still resonates among one-time readers of his compelling historical books—*Gallipoli*, *The White Nile*, *The Blue Nile*, *Cooper's Creek* and *The Fatal Impact* to name a few—he has been less recognised in his own country than he deserves to be. In 1990

Tom Pocock, British war correspondent, journalist and writer, brought out his well-researched biography, *Alan Moorehead*, in which he presented Moorehead's career as a war correspondent and his personal life story until his death in 1983. But from choice, Pocock paid only passing attention to Moorehead's singular literary achievement and his contribution as one of the outstanding historical writers of his time. The National Library of Australia has recognised the need to redress this situation, and *Alan Moorehead: A Rediscovery* begins its new biography series, 'An Australian Life'.

Moorehead's 'rediscovery' turns on the rich resources of the Alan Moorehead Papers held in the National Library's Manuscripts Collection. It also draws on Moorehead's 20 books in the Library's general collection which, in their many editions and translations, make up 201 entries in the Library's Catalogue. In addition, the brief but pertinent oral history interview made by Hazel de Berg with Alan Moorehead at the National Library in 1964, on his return from a visit to Antarctica with Sidney Nolan, affords a vital snapshot of the man.

The manuscript papers are the extensive documentary record of an extraordinarily productive journalistic and literary life. At the age of 15 Moorehead planned to become a writer. His earliest diary, in 1926, dating from his schooldays, bears the proprietorial



Alan Moorehead's passport col. photograph; 15.3 x 19.2 cm  
From the papers of Alan Moorehead, 1926–1971  
Manuscript Collection  
MS 5654, Box 43, Folder 321,  
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Alan Moorehead and Sidney Nolan, with a frying pan in Shackleton's Hut, Antarctica  
From the papers of Alan Moorehead, 1926–1971  
Manuscript Collection  
MS 5654, Box 43, Folder 321  
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message, 'All rights reserved. A. McCrae Moorehead'. But his skill in swift notation and vivid impressionistic writing sprang from his period as a fledgling journalist on the Melbourne *Herald*, where he honed his short-term memory, interviewed without a pen, and quickly recognised that he 'had a nose for news, the trick of knowing just what will interest people and attract attention'.

In 1936, oppressed by 'a country where nothing happened', his quest for a wider and more vivid life took Moorehead to England and, when fortune smiled, to his first job in 1937 as a 'retainer' for the *Daily Express* in the Mediterranean. When World War II broke out, so successful was his preliminary reportage that he notched up an appointment at the *Express* office in Paris, heading their office in Rome later, and in 1940 became the *Daily Express* foreign correspondent and war correspondent in Cairo, serving a newspaper owned by the powerful Lord Beaverbrook, and with a daily circulation in Britain of over two million.

Moorehead's despatches from the North African battlefield—assembled in press cutting albums and boxed folders in his papers—are urgent and immediate, with a sense of news unfolding into history. Written in a crisp, often conversational tone that spoke directly to his readers, and offering a participant sense

of involvement in the swing and noise of battle, they had deep impact upon his huge audiences and won him the reputation of 'the prince of war correspondents'.

The war also provided the wellspring for his career as an author. Writing at breakneck speed between battlefield sorties, Moorehead published three compelling books on the North African campaign—*Mediterranean Front* (1941), *A Year of Battle* (1942) and *The End in Africa* (1943)—a trio that appeared as an omnibus edition, *African Trilogy*, in 1944. A year later, following his own grim slog through war-torn Europe, he published *Eclipse*, a descriptive, participant and analytical overview of the campaigns that eventually destroyed Germany's and Italy's military power. *Montgomery*, his first-off-the-rank biography of the charismatic general with whom he had established personal links in wartime, appeared in 1946.

Moorehead emerged from the war as a celebrity and with a strong sense of self-demand. He had married an English woman, Lucy Milner, editor of the Woman's Page of the *Daily Express*, in 1940, and—at first, as itinerant tenants in grand places and, from 1949, in their own villa at Port Ercole south of Florence—they became cultivated expatriates in Italy. It was a base from which Moorehead took off on his extensive travels, gathering with his camera eye material for his magazine and newspaper assignments and, increasingly and importantly, impressions and research material for his books.

Photo of Harry Moorehead (uncle of Alan Moorehead) at Gallipoli  
From the papers of Alan Moorehead, 1926–1971  
Manuscript Collection  
MS 5654, Box 42, Folder 320  
nla.ms-ms5654-0-5x



The book that would establish Moorehead as a historical writer of the first rank and enable him to realise his own private dream was *Gallipoli* (1956), the first fully rounded, interpretative study of the Dardanelles campaign. It took the literary and military world by storm and won him election to the Royal Society of Literature. He would follow it, across several years, with a series of books focussed on Africa, the continent that had become dear to him from long association. *No Room in the Ark* (1959), *The White Nile* (1960) and *The Blue Nile* (1962) all added to his high literary profile. To write them, Moorehead involved himself in long sojourns in Africa. *No Room in the Ark*, with its engaging descriptions of African wildlife, provided an experience that also made him an ardent and articulate conservationist. And, following in the footsteps of the eighteenth and nineteenth century explorers who had first penetrated the 'dark continent', Moorehead tracked their travels and skilfully bound their stories and the diverse history of a polyglot continent around its two great rivers, in his books *The White Nile* and *The Blue Nile*.

It was *Cooper's Creek* (1963), the lyrical, elegiac narrative of the Burke and Wills Expedition, that brought Moorehead back to his own country and to an awareness of its beauty, mystery and history. Here his friendship with that other expatriate Australian, the artist Sidney Nolan, proved a vital initiating force while,



Alan Moorehead on his wedding day with wife Lucy, Rome, 1939  
b&w photograph; 24.0 x 16.7 cm  
From the papers of Tom Pocock, 1987–1990  
Manuscript Collection, MS 8377,  
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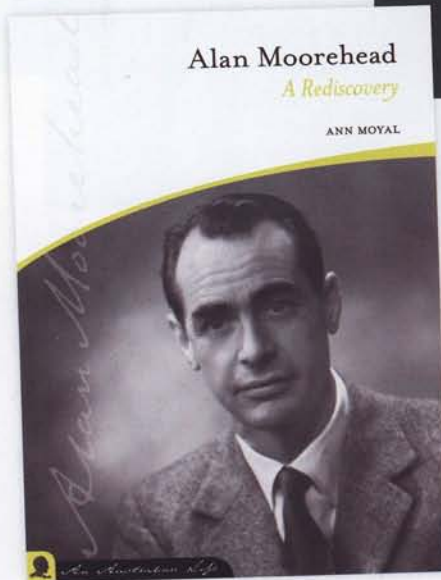
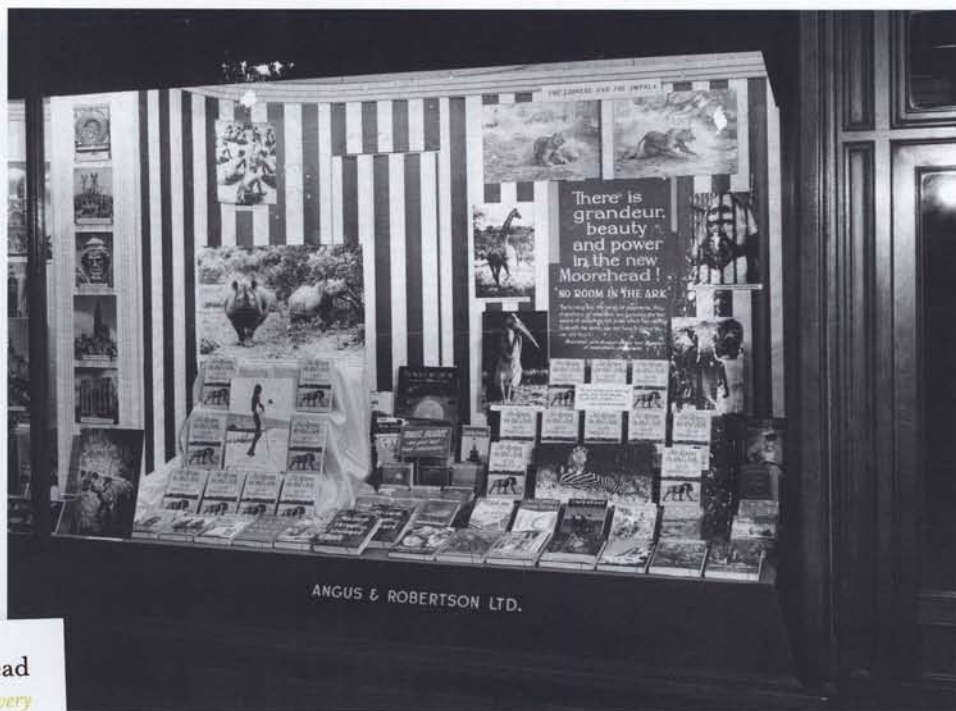
Alan Moorehead (on right),  
Western Desert, 1940s  
b&w photograph; 15.2 x 15.4 cm  
From the papers of Tom Pocock,  
1987–1990  
Manuscript Collection, MS 8377,  
Folder of photographs  
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in turn, Moorehead's eloquent writing inspired Nolan's mystic 'Gallipoli series' of artworks and influenced his return to further paintings of Burke and Wills. The two men's close friendship and interaction emerges clearly from their correspondence. Moorehead's subsequent visits to Australia after *Cooper's Creek* brought him into personal contact with Manning Clark, the one major historian in the country to realise Moorehead's large impact both in opening up the history of Australia and putting it on the international map.

The contact introduced him too to an array of scientists who shared his views on the survival of precious wildlife in the face of human indifference and greed. It was a view that Moorehead would reflect in *The Fatal Impact* (1966), his powerful and controversial interpretation of the legacy of Captain Cook's Pacific and Antarctic voyages which, calling at Tahiti and Australia and opening up the wildlife of the sub-Antarctic islands to commercial exploitation, were fated to bring human and ecological disaster in their wake. Like all Moorehead's books, this work drew enormous sales; it also made him the Patron of the World League for Conservation.

When, in 1966, Moorehead made his now annual visit to Australia, this time with his wife, younger son and daughter, he had

Bookshop window displaying copies of Alan Moorehead's book, *No Room in the Ark* From the papers of Alan Moorehead, 1926–1971 Manuscript Collection MS 5654, Box 42, Folder 320, nla.ms-ms5654-0-4x



Cover of Ann Moyal's *Alan Moorehead: A Rediscovery* (National Library of Australia, 2005) Pictures Collection nla.int-ls27616-bk

completed a television script for his manuscript 'Darwin and the *Beagle*'. But tragedy struck the gifted writer before the book saw print. That December, suffering from headaches, he went into London's Westminster Hospital for an angiogram which precipitated a major stroke. It was followed by an operation, in which brain damage occurred, affecting the communicating nerves. At 56, Moorehead, one of the great

communicators of his time, could

neither speak, read, nor write. Through his talented wife Lucy, however, his writing voice went on. *Darwin and the Beagle* was brought out as a beautifully illustrated book in 1969 and, in 1972, Lucy Moorehead gathered together her husband's scattered autobiographical essays and published them as *A Late Education*. It is also due largely to her administrative talent and commitment throughout her husband's career that his private papers—his professional and personal correspondence, diaries, magazine and journal essays, press cuttings, book serialisations, reviews of his works, the background notes, drafts and proofs of his writings, and material relating to his unpublished writings—have been so comprehensively preserved. During the 1960s, two major American universities pressed Moorehead to deposit his private papers as a core in their collections of

contemporary writers. Instead, in 1971, Alan and Lucy Moorehead brought his papers to Australia to present them in person to the National Library.

Alan Moorehead died in London in 1983, and is buried at Hampstead Cemetery, Fortune Green. Yet, living long overseas, he remained at heart an Australian. In his 1964 oral history interview with Hazel de Berg (the transcript of which caused him, he confided, to donate his papers to the Library) he made the following revealing statement:

The Australia I am in now in 1964 seems to me to be an entirely different place ... I'm speaking now of those of us who have gone abroad. We've made our homes and married there, our children have been brought up in foreign countries. But now, returning to Australia, we have a tremendous tug back to the beginnings of our lives, and I know that now if I were younger, I would not hesitate for two minutes, I would return to this country and I would write here of Australian themes. You must in the end, I think, if you are a writer, return at last to your roots.

ANN MOYAL is the author of the National Library's *Alan Moorehead: A Rediscovery*. As a young Australian historian, she also worked for Lord Beaverbrook, and contributed to two Australian editions of Alan Moorehead's books, *The Fatal Impact* (1987) and *Gallipoli* (1989)