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At Home Abroad: Mark Twain in Australasia

Miriam Jones Shillingsburg

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At Home Abroad brings attention to a little known period in the career of America's most notable humorist. It follows the writer-performer Down Under on a journey through thirty lectures in colonial Australia and New Zealand.

This appealing book is a daily account of Twain's activities and is based upon his notebooks his letters, and newspaper reports that appeared both in cities and in the provinces. Shillingsburg offers serious evaluation of Australasian criticism that appeared in reviews of Twain's performances, in editorials about humor, and in the critical reception of his last travel book, *More Tramps Abroad*. She shows this world famous literary man in his posturing and performing as he delights the audiences Down Under.

She begins with a discussion of Twain's accumulating debt and his bankruptcy in the early nineties, and provides biographical details during the last fifteen weeks of 1895. The cultural and intellectual context in which she places this information clarifies Twain's mystifying comments to reporters, the puzzling responses to some of his jokes, and his unique notebook entries.

She shows that Twain's interest in geography and local history illuminates comments he made in his travel book. Her discussion of the distinctive political and economic matters in the colonies gives a clue to the enormously popular reception he received, for on this tour Twain captivated nearly everyone. Not only glamorous but also the ordinary folk paid their "splendid shilling" to hear him. Looking like a "graven image," he spun out his seemingly spontaneous yarns.

The questions they asked him reveal how well they knew American literature in 1895 and show their earnest groping to find their own native literature. Those questions and the articles written from them, in turn, drew Twain's compliments and demonstrated a mutual respect between the master humorist and his audience.

Shillingsburg shows that ideas on wit and humor were articulated most clearly in interviews in Sydney and his thoughts on "American" humor were most specifically stated in Auckland. She examines these in context of the Australasian comments both on Twain's formal and informal speeches.

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