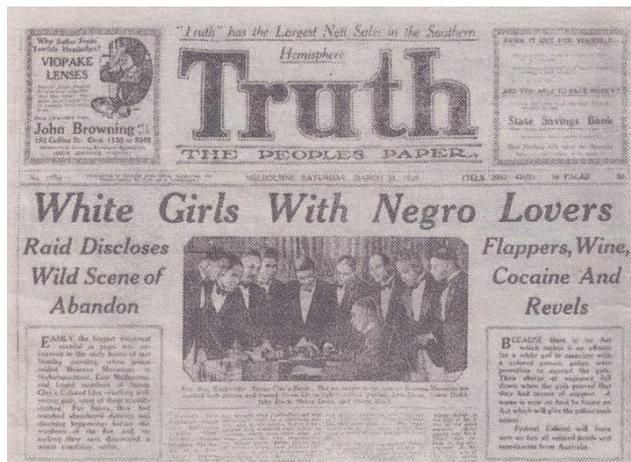


HARLEM NIGHTS: THE SECRET HISTORY OF AUSTRALIA'S JAZZ AGE

by Deirdre O'Connell. Nonfiction MUP, 408pp, \$34.99

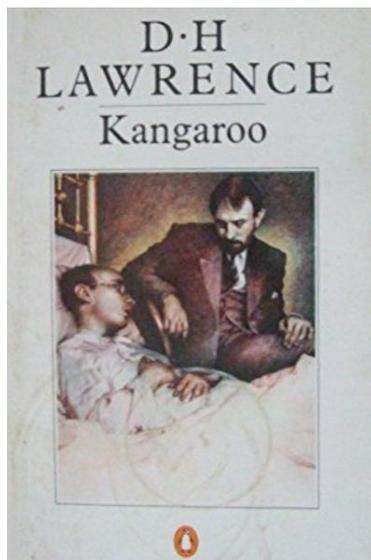
Reviewed by Richard King*

[This review appeared in the Weekend Australian on December 4, 2021, under the heading "Cultures out of tune: The land of the fair go didn't live up."]



Note the headline of this article in Truth at the time: "White Girls with Negro Lovers"...

As sure as guns is guns, if we let in coloured labour, they'll swallow us. They hate us. All the other colours hate the white. And they're only waiting till we haven't got the pull over them. They're only waiting. And then what about poor little Australia?" So yammers Jack Callcott in *Kangaroo*, D H Lawrence's fictionalised account of his three-month sojourn in NSW in the early 1920s.



*Richard King is the author of "On Offence: The Politics of Indignation" (Scribe, 2013).

His interlocutor is Richard Somers, Lawrence's fictional alter ego, and the conversation is almost certainly based on ones the novelist had himself with anti-communist and white-nationalist elements at the fringes of political life in Sydney.

The association did not end well. Concerned that Lawrence might expose them, key members of this secretive milieu made threats against the novelist that may well have precipitated his departure from Australia. Not for the first time, or for the last, the reactionary politics of Australia found expression in aesthetic exile.

Deirdre O'Connell's *Harlem Nights* is in many ways a meditation on this deep relationship between parochialism and philistinism. Its primary focus is the American jazz revue billed as "Sonny Clay's Colored Idea", which toured Sydney and Melbourne in the late 1920s and was targeted by a network of pressmen, policemen and unionists in thrall to ideas of racial purity and Billy Hughes-style nationalism. So far-reaching was the campaign against the revue that its wider socio-historical resonance is almost self-establishing: just as modern jazz itself seemed to violate the natural laws of harmony, so the spread of the "Negro vogue" threatened the natural order of humanity in our settler-colonial society girt by sea.



The African—American 'coloured revue' band Sonny Clay's Plantation Orchestra, which was targeted by a network of pressmen, policemen and unionists in thrall to ideas of racial purity and Billy Hughes-style nationalism...

Sonny Clay and his fellow musicians arrived in Sydney in 1928, where they received a largely friendly welcome. Notwithstanding poor notices from a handful of critics, their sets were popular with metropolitan audiences desperate for a bit of Hollywood-style glamour. It was only when rumours began to circulate that male members of the Colored Idea had been fraternising with white Australian women that public opinion began to turn against the outfit. In Melbourne police raided two

apartments occupied by members of the group. The women present were charged with "vagrancy" (a euphemism for prostitution) and although they were found not guilty by the court, the scandal gathered such momentum that the federal government revoked the musicians' permits, effectively deporting them. As an ugly crowd gathered at Central Station in Sydney to see the departing musicians off, Clay told reporters that the land of the fair go hadn't exactly lived up to its billing.



Deirdre O'Connell: she brings this social geography to life with skill and intelligence...

O'Connell relates this shameful episode in meticulous and picturesque detail. And though the events alone would not be enough to sustain the book over 400 pages, the author's sense for how those events relate to broader social trends makes *Harlem Nights* a fascinating read. The "culture war at the heart of Australian Modernism" was one in which the themes of race, myth-making, globalisation and technology combined to often explosive effect, and the Sonny Clay scandal shines a light on the discrete but overlapping milieux at the centre of that conflagration: on the theatre proprietors, impresarios, taste-makers, police officers, unionists, eugenicists, nationalists, politicians and eye-rolling flappers that populated Sydney and Melbourne in the fraught hiatus between the two wars. Through numerous, short, engaging portraits — all of them based on prodigious research — O'Connell brings this social geography to life with skill and intelligence.

"More than a skirmish between Black and White," writes O'Connell in one of the book's key passages, "two aesthetic sensibilities were in play: the singular purity of

the White Australian citizen soldier, cleansed by blood sacrifice, bonded by the steady measure of the brass band and elevated by the mythology of eternalism pitted against the sharp angular silhouettes of the jazzmen, bearers of a polyphonic sound that demanded two answers to every musical question."

Thus *Harlem Nights* recalls us to the relationship between "culture" in the narrow sense and "culture" in the broadest one — between aesthetic endeavour and a whole way of life — reminding us along the way of the fundamental difference between an invented tradition and a living one. No prizes for guessing which is which, or what tunes Jack Callcott and his mates were humming as they contemplated the "inferior" races.
