

Land of make believe

The *Lord of the Rings* and its ilk are indebted to Terra Australis, land of mutants, Lilliputians and flying prostitutes, writes Steve Meacham.

Trivia question: name the father of invention whose work indirectly inspired such giant characters of fiction as Frodo Baggins, Darth Vader, Tarzan, Captain Kirk, Winston Smith and Ginger from *Gilligan's Island*.

Need a clue? According to rare book specialist Derek McDonnell, it's not H.G. Wells, Jules Verne, Daniel Defoe or even Jonathan Swift. Indeed, he says those four, along with Aldous Huxley and George Orwell, were simply mining a seam of imaginary voyages and invented worlds pioneered by a much earlier author. So who is the grandfather of Gulliver? The forerunner of Robinson Crusoe?

Step forward, the man for all seasons - Sir Thomas More, chancellor of England, Catholic martyr, and one of the geniuses of the Renaissance. In 1516-19 - years before his execution on the orders of Henry VIII - More wrote a book in Latin which became a European cornerstone of enlightened thought. We know it as More's *Utopia*.

Now More's masterpiece is being reassessed thanks to an intriguing catalogue which charts the 500-year history of alternative worlds and fantasies of time or space. Produced by Hordern House, the Potts Point specialists in antiquarian books, the catalogue is the culmination of 10 years' research. It's designed to appeal not just to wealthy international collectors who will pay anything from \$650 to \$100,000-plus for the editions on offer, but to anyone interested in the fantasy and science-fiction genre.

For Australians, the most fascinating aspect of this re-examination is that the search for the southern continent played such a pivotal role in utopian literature. For centuries, philosophers and cartographers had speculated about the existence of a huge land mass supposedly balancing the world. Where better to set a story about an alternative culture or a new world than "Terra Australis"?

"No-one has attempted a catalogue of this breadth before," says McDonnell. "It starts with the concept of utopia invented by More - an imaginary world where everything is wonderful - and ends with the notion of dystopia - typified by books like *1984* and *Brave New World* - where everything is dreadful.

Shades of fantasy ... In the 1600s, Giovanni Botero imagined a character who developed a grotesque foot which he used to shield himself from the southern sun.

discovery of Australia". "Swift was very precise about where he located his story ... in 1699 Gulliver's ship is driven by a violent storm to the northwest of Van Diemen's Land. The latitude for the imaginary Lilliput is given as 32 degrees 2 minutes south - which places it in South Australia."

McDonnell opens a rare copy of More's great book, "a good example of the third and essentially best edition", dating from 1518. Only about a dozen copies are left. This one is worth "well over \$100,000".

"All of science fiction, all of fantasy fiction, anything which involves a new and better world, or a parallel world, has *Utopia* as its ancestor," says McDonnell. He points at some of the conceits More developed to make his story seem more believable: the map, the invented language - both techniques used 400 years later by Tolkien in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Such "framing devices" became a tool-in-trade for authors of invented

to extraordinary lengths to protect their real identity. Publishers would often disguise the true origins of a work with a fake imprint. "The authors are often quite radical, and there's heaps of perverts."

One work, *The Isle of Pines* by Henry Neville - "the only major book we couldn't find for this catalogue" - tells the sexual adventures of a man shipwrecked in the Pacific with three women. Its sauciness turned it into a 17th-century publishing sensation. Another early work, by the French author Gabriel de Foigny, *A New Discovery of Terra Incognita Australis* (1676), is noteworthy on two accounts. First, de Foigny referred to the people of his *Terre Australe* as "Australiens" - which became "Australians" in the 1693 English translation - the first time the term was used to describe the inhabitants of the southern continent. Second, his hero, Jacques Sadeur, is a shipwrecked hermaphrodite who finds Western Australia is populated by a tribe of hermaphrodites.

Another author content to hide in the shadows was John Elliott, a Yorkshire midshipman who sailed with Cook on the *Resolution*. He has recently been identified as the author of *The Travels of Hildebrand Bowman*, regarded as the first New Zealand novel. Published in 1778, it purports to be the story of a crewman on the *Adventure*, Cook's second ship on his second voyage, who was mistakenly abandoned during a real incident in 1773 when cannibals attacked a shore party. His subsequent adventures include an encounter with a flying prostitute.

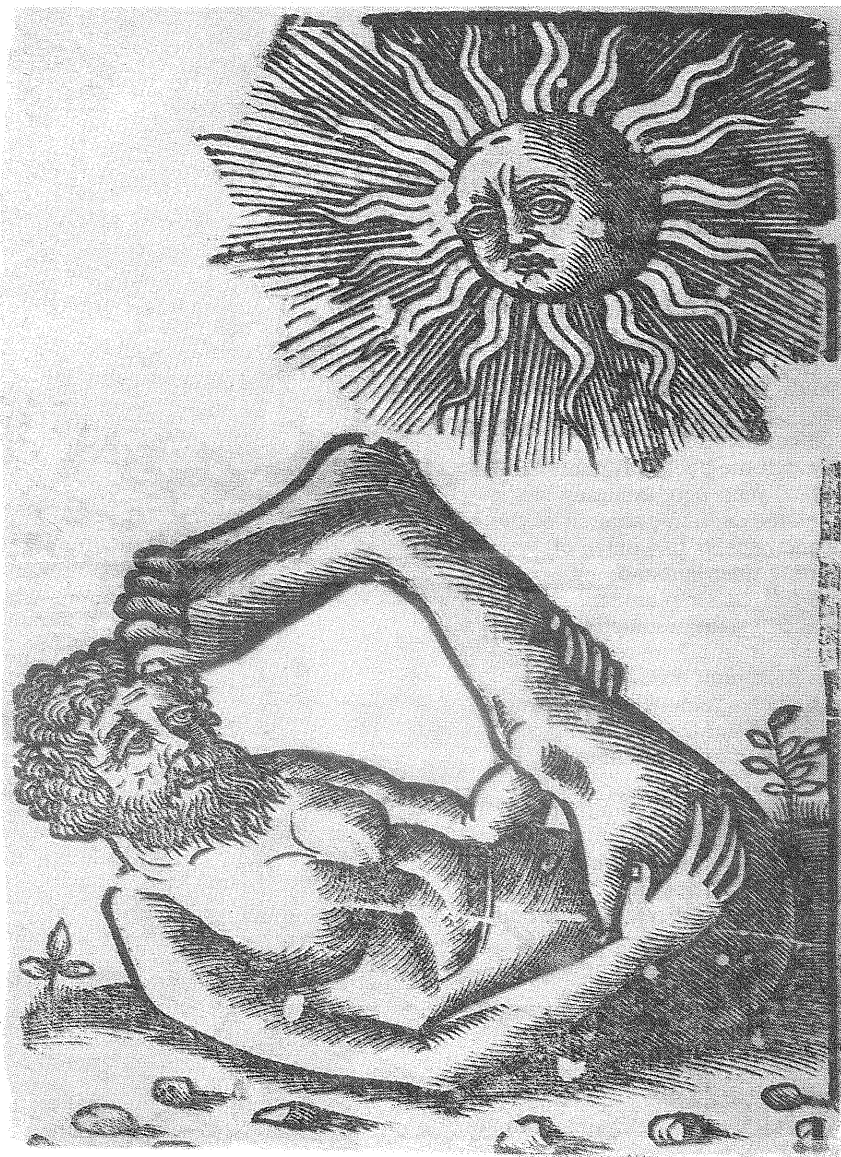
"*Gulliver's Travels* is the greatest work of literature associated with the discovery of Australia."

An even earlier book, Giovanni Botero's *Le Relationi Universali di Giovanni Botero Benese* (1618), includes woodcuts of characters said to inhabit the southern continent - characters who wouldn't look out of place in *Star Wars*, such as the man who has developed a grotesque foot which he uses to shield himself from the southern sun. No less bizarre is the 1781 account, by pornographer Restif de la Bretonne, of an imaginary voyage in which he travelled by flying machine to Australia. Or Thomas Killigrew's 1720 work which imagines an Australian utopia inhabited by descendants of ancient Greece.

The key work marking the change from utopia to voyages of imagined discovery was *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) - so popular that it inspired a genre known as "the Robinsonade". "Defoe's original book is a very serious work of moral redemption," says McDonnell. "It's about Crusoe finding himself in God, becoming at one with the world around him ... People like Rousseau regarded it as the must-read book of the 18th century. But over time the Robinsonade degenerated into *Swiss Family Robinson*, and then finally *Gilligan's Island*."

But the genre of More and Defoe is far from dead. Apart from being seen constantly on TV, in adventures of the *Starship Enterprise*, or even *The Simpsons*, it still features in serious literature. "Tim Winton's new novel, *Dirt Music*, is at least partly Robinsonade," says McDonnell. "It ends with redemption on an island." ▀

Imaginary Voyages and Invented Worlds, is published by Hordern House, \$45.



"Once *Utopia* was written, a whole series of works came out imagining what an alternative world could be. Inevitably they were set in the undiscovered southern continent. For the first 300 years, many of those imaginary voyages use the Pacific or Australia as their blank slate."

But as real-life navigators made their discoveries, the authors adapted. Just as More used the voyages of Vespucci to lend credence to his story set in the Americas, so his successors used the voyages of Dampier, Cook and La Perouse, both as a source and as a means of camouflaging their invention. Even when the great navigators had pencilled in the Australian coast, authors of utopias continued to set their stories here - but in the outback, where no explorer had been. "It's a really happy accident that this hugely rich and important genre has this Australian accent all the way through," says McDonnell.

Take *Gulliver's Travels*, which McDonnell calls "the greatest work of literature associated with the

voyages. Shipwrecks were popular to explain how their heroes got from the old world into the new one. Another technique was to provide some complicated explanation about the source of the book: McDonnell calls it the "this manuscript was written by a Spanish adventurer who died, but fortunately it was found on a ship by a Belgian friend who translated it into English and gave it to me" excuse. Other authors employed an almost 20th-century conspiracy theory approach: "These strange things are happening in the world but the authorities won't tell us about them."

Many of the early utopian authors were intellectual rebels - men such as Sir Francis Bacon (*New Atlantis*) or James Harrington (*The Commonwealth of Oceana*) who had been influential politicians but had fallen from grace.

"A lot of them were outsiders, politically or religiously, and they ended up in trouble, falling foul of the authorities," says McDonnell, adding that they would sometimes go