



LITTLE FLIGHT READING

FABULOUS FABLES

Barry Oakley and Vanessa Walker enjoy two new books on intrepid tilts at travel

WAY back in the medieval 1950s, when hitchhiking was still possible, a fellow-student and I thumbed the first of a series of rides that would take us, we hoped, from suburban Melbourne to the remote outpost of Darwin.

I never got there, succumbing, to the amusement of the locals, to sunstroke at Katherine. What to do, since I'd contracted with a magazine to write about the journey, to culminate in an expose of life in the frontier town? I made it up, and I have never enjoyed a piece of writing more, creating a fiction that the readers (if there were any) would take as fact. "So this is Darwin" announced the headline. It wasn't.

Having lied myself, I understand what drove Louis de Rougemont, the weatherbeaten prince of the art. In *The Fabulist: The Incredible Story of Louis de Rougemont* by Rod Howard (Random House, \$32.95), we learn his fabrications started with his name. It was Grin at the time of his birth in Switzerland, but it mutated into Griener, Green, and then into the sonorous cognomen that was to become famous at the end of the 19th century.

"De Rougemont made a bigger splash than any other Australian writer has begun to make in a hundred years," wrote Henry Lawson, not without envy. He was right then and he's right now. When he arrived in London having deserted his struggling family in Sydney, de Rougemont had a sensational story, and the locals swallowed it.

De Rougemont was penniless and



looked it, but before William Fitzgerald, editor of *Wide World* — Britain's first true-life adventure magazine — could show him the door, the sultan of spin stopped him in his tracks: "I have seen what no other man has seen. I have lived near 30 years marooned in the Australian desert." How could the man who'd published *Out of the Lion's Jaws* and *Buried Alive by a Dead Elephant* resist this?

In August 1898 the first instalment appeared. It began with a shipwreck. De Rougemont claimed to have been on a pearling lugger that struck a reef in a storm. He and a dog called Bruno were the only survivors, and he made it to land only by hanging on to Bruno's tail. He finds himself trapped on a tiny island, builds a house out of oyster shells and amuses himself by cruising the lagoon on a turtle's back.

Sales of the magazine soared but the great adventurer was just warming up. In the next episode he is rescued by Aborigines in a catamaran, who take him to the mainland, where he faces a less friendly tribe. Fearing they might be cannibals, he diverts them with "some of my acrobatic tricks and contortions". He's regarded as a god, gifts are lavished on him, but de Rougemont heads off into the desert with his native wife in the general direction of civilisation, encounters a long-lost explorer and discovers an abundance of gold and gemstones.

His story was becoming increasingly preposterous and Louis Becke, a genuine Australian outdoorsman living in London, wrote a mocking response in the rival *Daily Chronicle*. Its editor, Henry Massingham, realised he was on to an even better story: de Rougemont was almost certainly a fake.

But the man's confidence was unshakeable and he published a withering riposte. His replies to questions from alleged experts were equally impressive, with a persuasively detailed recollection of his life among Aborigines; though when quizzed about the times before and after his great adventure, he fell back on the Australian Wheat Board defence: "I do not recall."

"George Washington Munchausen De Spoof" London *Punch* called him, and in his third instalment he seemed to be satirising himself. He had now wandered back to the coast, where he hunted wombats to make sandals from their skins. "I had seen them, rising in clouds every morning at dusk."

This caused merriment in the antipodes and the



Sydney *Daily Telegraph* started digging in his home town. It found a number of people who were prepared to testify that he was Henri Grien. His wife delivered the coup de grace: "There is no one else who looks like Henri. It is him, without a doubt." (There was no one like him: life had carved great furrows on his face. As one lady put it, "no wonder the cannibals didn't eat him".)

Undeterred, de Rougemont returned to Australia in 1901 and re-invented himself as a vaudeville artist, billed as The Greatest Liar on Earth. He had the shortest run in Melbourne's Bijou Theatre's history. He was jeered off the stage in four minutes.

He had more success with his turtle-riding act at the London Hippodrome but his final appearance was in Piccadilly, selling boxes of matches alongside wounded soldiers from World War I.

When he died, in 1921, his pauper's coffin was inscribed with the name Louis Redman. As Rod Howard puts it in this endlessly entertaining book: "A fabulist to the last."

Barry Oakley

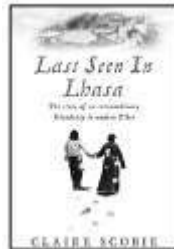
Barry Oakley is a former literary editor of *The Australian*; his most recent novel is *Don't Leave Me* (Text).

CLAIRE Scobie is a journalist who worked on the *Telegraph Magazine* in London, which bolsters her writing credentials for the travel memoir *Last Seen in Lhasa* (Random House, \$35).

Years ago she visited one of the wildest regions of Tibet: the rainy, leech-infested, untamed Pemako, which also straddles India's Arunachal Pradesh, for a story about a search for the elusive red lily, which then had not been propagated in the West.

That trip failed in its goal so she set out on another search led by explorer Ian Baker, who also invited a Tibetan nun. Ani (simply the Tibetan word for nun, so her identity is protected) is a wandering mystic yogini who was asked to accompany the group because of her knowledge of that secluded area as well as her spiritual authenticity.

In Tibet the landscape is believed to be alive, with the geography of the land following the contours of deities' bodies. Enter particular areas with the right insight and they act as a portal to deep mystical experiences. In more ways than one, if you enter a place



such as Pemako, you need a guide. Labouring under the ambitious, flawed leadership of Baker (who, it turned out, had an ulterior motive: to penetrate further into the five uncharted miles of the Tsangpo Gorge, the origin of the Shangri-la myth), Scobie became intrigued by Ani's wild, kind, unfettered way of being, by her beautiful mind.

Despite her successful career, Scobie had been aware of a feeling of disconnection in her driven urban existence. She tells us she had to look up the word compassion in the dictionary. She recalls how after an exhausting day she arrived home to her Brixton, London, apartment and just happened to open a letter that mentioned surrender and was so struck by the word's potency she collapsed on the floor, inert.

Scobie, though, is no flake, as is revealed by her subsequent years of travelling to Tibet to explore, report and, most importantly, nourish her friendship with Ani. Together they make the pilgrimage to sacred Mt Kailash in the east, they witness Lhasa's decline into today's heavily policed town where Tibetans are outnumbered by Chinese two to one, they watch as lives evolve and dissolve, while all the time growing older and closer.

Without a phone, email, or even a fixed address, Ani wasn't always easy to locate. On one of her trips to Tibet, Scobie tracked her down to a mountain cave perched high above a sky burial site (where the bodies of the dead are fed to vultures) where Ani was trying to refine the practice of *chod*: cutting the attachment to one's body by meditating on its destruction.

Scobie finds her life is reshaped by her connection with Ani. She moves from England to Australia and eventually decides to write about their friendship to record the vanishing lifestyle of wandering mystics. *Last Seen in Lhasa* is a wonderful book: warm and sincere about this extraordinary friendship, alive and honest about the changes being wrought in Tibet. Mao Zedong may have perpetrated the most visible horrors on the Tibetan people nearly 50 years ago but, in the years since, their way of life has been eroded by seemingly smaller, incremental abuses.

This book stayed with me for weeks, popping into my mind in quiet moments, making me feel sad about the big picture but hopeful about the web of inspiring relationships beneath.

Vanessa Walker

Vanessa Walker is the author of *Mantras and Misdemeanours: An Accidental Love Story* (Allen & Unwin).