

## LITERATURE IN THE EIGHTEEN NINETIES IN AUSTRALIA\*

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THE first duty of anyone discussing Australian literature in the nineties is, I imagine, to demonstrate the existence of his subject. In Australia's literary development, is there a period "the nineties" with distinctive characteristics that can be intelligently discussed, and if so, may the writing of this period be justly described as "literature"? My first duty is to answer these questions, and indeed I shall make that my whole duty. I propose to explore the identity of this phase of Australian literature, and to attempt an evaluation of it in terms of the writing then produced.

Was there a literary period "the nineties" in Australia? The stages of Australian literary history have still to be satisfactorily determined. The present tendency is to fix them in accordance with existing political or economic divisions, so that a new age is dated from the gold-rushes of 1851, for instance, another from the nineties or from the attainment of Federation in 1901, and another from the Great War of 1914-1918. This is to determine periods of literary development by reference to non-literary criteria, and the boundaries that result are often fallacious. Accepting the gold-rush of 1851 as a dividing line, we find a novelist of the time, like Mrs. Vidal, writing four of her eleven books before 1851, and seven after, while the activity of a poet like Charles Harpur extends from the eighteen thirties to the eighteen sixties. The dividing line of 1851 can be established only by bisecting the production of the writers of the day. Again, the war of 1914-1918, whatever its importance in Australian history, failed to set Australian literature on a new course. All the major authors who came into prominence in the years immediately following the war had already published before 1918, and it was not until the thirties that a new generation appeared. Not the least of the hazards of charting the phases of Australian literary development by reference to phases in Australian history is that the historians themselves cannot be relied upon. The writer of a survey of Australian literature may begin a new age with the gold-rushes, only to discover, on looking round, that the historians have meanwhile backed out—this boundary is beginning to blur and waver even in Australian history, if it has not already dissolved.

The nineties is one literary period which has been fixed upon as the expression of movements in Australian history. The writing of this time (we are told) exhibits the awakening of an Australian national consciousness. With the foundation of *The Bulletin* in 1880, there arises a group of writers determined to exploit Australian material, so that the school of the stockwhip and the gumtree supersedes the effete

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and derivative tradition of an earlier age: the work of this new school reflects the political climate of the day in its hostility to privilege and social injustice, and in its vision of an ideal future for the new continent in the south. The literature of the nineties is the robust and buoyant literature of a new nation coming to birth: its characteristic achievement in verse is to be seen in the ballad, and in prose in the short story—in these two forms Australian writing first becomes independent of the English tradition.

This is a widely accepted view of the nineties in Australian literature, though it has not passed unchallenged. More than one critic has observed that the assimilation of Australian material had been going on long before this, even in Kendall and Harpur: it is not a trend that first appeared towards the turn of the century. The role of *The Bulletin* in promoting an Australian literature was re-examined by Mr. K. Levis in an article in *Southerly* in 1950, and his researches compel further qualifications of the orthodox view. While the initial number of *The Bulletin* expressed the proprietors' aim to establish a journal "unsurpassed in vigor, freshness, and geniality of its literary contributions",<sup>1</sup> Mr. Levis has shown that in the first year of its publication, only two stories appeared, one of them the serial *Adrienne*, subtitled "A Love Story of the Lancashire Cotton Distress". Only two stories (both set in France) appeared in the second year, and four in the year following; in the first decade of *The Bulletin's* existence, it did not average more than ten stories in a year.<sup>2</sup> Although verse was a feature from the beginning, the early *Bulletin* can hardly be regarded as the spearhead of a genuine Australian literature: this character it only gradually acquired. Recently a more general appraisal of the nineties has been attempted by Vance Palmer, and while *The Legend of the Nineties* (1954) is a discussion of the problems of interpreting this period rather than a solution of any of them, its general tendency is scarcely to fortify the accepted view. Certainly the interpretation of the nineties in Australian literature is becoming more contentious, with the consequence (as one scholar has remarked in another connection) that even a man who sits on the fence may find it charged with electricity.

This is a posture I shall not assume. I should accept the view that the writers of the nineties do set out to exploit indigenous material, to produce a literature that shall be defiantly Australian, and that their work does reflect the egalitarian and utopian visions of the day. Most readers of the *Australian Bush Ballads* (1955) collected by Douglas Stewart and Nancy Keesing will endorse the claim in the introduction that these ballads, taken as a body, are "the most distinctively national statement Australian poetry has yet made". One could hardly imagine this verse as having been written anywhere else. No one who has read Henry Lawson's autobiography (still in manuscript in the Mitchell Library, though a condensation was published in *The Lone Hand* in March, 1908) will doubt his sensitiveness to social and economic injustice; the influence on Joseph Furphy of such doctrinaire socialist

<sup>1</sup> Editorial, 31 January, 1880.

<sup>2</sup> See K. Levis, "The Role of *The Bulletin* in Indigenous Short-Story Writing during the Eighties and Nineties", *Southerly*, Vol. XI (1950), pp. 220-228.

writings as *Looking Backward* and *Cæsar's Column* hardly admits of discussion. There is abundant evidence that the writers of the nineties do make a vigorous use of Australian material, and their work is coloured by the political sentiment of the time.

But if this conclusion is unavoidable, so are two further ones. The first, that this was not the *only* kind of writing that was being done in the nineties; and the second, that it may not have been the *best* writing that was being done. The scope of literary activity in the nineties cannot be restricted to the literature of national sentiment. It is surprising how much of the verse appearing in *The Bulletin* itself still upholds the "pretty" tradition of Victorian poetry: Daley, Quinn, Hebblethwaite, Hubert Church and a dozen others still adhere to this view of the "poetic", the more "Australian" poems on which attention has fixed remaining only a fraction of their output. In any event, *The Bulletin* was not the only magazine of the time: we must attend to such symptoms as *The Centennial Magazine* (1888-1890), *Cosmos* (1894-1899), and the *Australian Magazine* (1899)—the last according to one of its leading spirits,<sup>3</sup> being formed by fugitives from *The Bulletin*. The *Australian Magazine* was a journal in which Brennan wrote critiques of contemporary English poets like Stephen Phillips and William Watson, a journal devoted less to the cause of Australian literature than to the cause of literature in Australia. Even *The Book-fellow*, founded by A. G. Stephens himself, could be regarded as something of a refuge from *The Bulletin*, an opportunity for Stephens to figure as a critic of French literature, and to introduce a series of articles by Brennan on the French symbolist poets.

The example of Brennan himself shows that the kind of writing usually accepted as typical of the nineties was not the only kind being written. Brennan began to write verse seriously in 1893, published poems in *The Bulletin* and other magazines, issued two collected volumes—*XVIII Poems* and *XXI Poems*—in 1897, wrote his *Lilith* sequence in 1898-1899, and by the turn of the century had his work practically done. While Brennan was contributing his first poems to *The Bulletin*, Henry Handel Richardson had begun making her translations from Jacobsen and Björnson, and in 1897 embarked on *Maurice Guest*, which was well advanced by the turn of the century, though its publication was delayed until 1908. Shaw Neilson began writing in the nineties, so did Dowell O'Reilly, and Hugh McCrae emerged shortly after. It is not difficult to show that what is accepted as the typical product of the nineties in literature—the ballad or short story of marked local colour, expressive of national sentiment and democratic in its temper—is but one element in the output of the time.

We must also consider whether writing of this type has not achieved a literary reputation out of proportion to its merit. The singularity of the balladists and short-story writers of the nineties is that their work was aimed always at the meridian of popular taste: they wrote the sort of literature that did not need to be interpreted before it could be understood. There are no obstacles to the immediate enjoyment of a poem like "The Man from Snowy River"; no particular intelligence is required to follow the adventures of Steele Rudd's characters in *On Our Selection* or in later books—

<sup>3</sup> A. Jose, *The Romantic Nineties* (1934), p. 4.

I have sometimes thought that intelligence can be a positive disadvantage. In the bush ballads there is no ambiguity of intention, and effects of indirection and obliquity are rare: everything can be immediately appreciated and understood. *The Bulletin* itself was a journal that was largely written by its readers: reciprocity of author and public could scarcely go any farther.<sup>4</sup>

It was under these conditions that the reputation of the nineties school first grew, and publishers' advertisements show how it continued to flourish when the nineties were over. According to advertisements in *The Lone Hand* in 1908, Angus and Robertson's Commonwealth Series—representative titles are *While the Billy Boils*, Farrell's *How He Died*, Brunton Stephens' *My Chinese Cook*, all retailing at a shilling each—had already sold over 140,000 copies; while another set of titles offered by the N.S.W. Bookstall Company—including collections by Steele Rudd, Dyson, and T. E. Spencer—are advertised as "selling in thousands". The nineties may have come to be considered a greater period in Australian literature than any before because a group of writers was then more successful than any before in capturing popular taste. The true greatness of any literary period, however, is to be estimated by other standards besides these. Few collections of modern Australian verse have had the popular success of *Around the Boree Log* (27th edition, 1952), but its author is not on that account the leading Australian poet of the twentieth century.

There has been another inflating process at work. As the nineties receded in time, they found a more lively existence—a second life—in anecdote and recollection. Some writers of the period had become legends in their life-time, for A. G. Stephens was being dubbed "the Pontiff of our literature" by Brennan in 1897, and in 1899, Victor Daley represented him in "Narcissus and some Tadpoles"<sup>4a</sup>:

I am the Blender of the pure  
Australian Brand of Literature.  
No verse, however fine, can be  
The radiant thing called Poetry  
Unless it is approved by me.  
I am the Critic set on high,  
The Red Page Rhadamanthus I.  
The Master, too, of the Event  
Am I on this weird Continent . . .

Even those who had not been legends in their lifetime began to acquire legendary features in the reminiscences of those who had known them. In 1931, F. J. Broomfield was already complaining of the multitudes of people who claimed an intimate acquaintance with Henry Lawson—"One had taught him to spell; one had taught him to read; one had taught him to think; one had taught him to rhyme; though another said that his mother had done that".<sup>5</sup> While Lawson's reputation does not

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Vance Palmer's excellent account of the *Bulletin* as "The Bushman's Bible" in the fifth chapter of *The Legend of the Nineties*.

<sup>4a</sup> *Bookfellow*, 29 April, 1899.

<sup>5</sup> *Henry Lawson and his Critics* (1931), p. 14.

need to be kept alive in this way, the accumulation of anecdote and reminiscence about him shows how the writers of the nineties are inclined to figure in the imagination of their immediate posterity. And when Arthur Jose publishes his recollections of the period under the title *The Romantic Nineties*, or when G. A. Taylor issues his under the title *Those Were the Days!* we begin to see the period generally as having a glow and a radiance about it, and set upon it a value that has no necessary relation to the excellence of the work that the age produced.

If we could examine the literature of the nineties apart from the reputation it enjoys, however, if we could disperse this afterglow of romantic reminiscence, we should discover that with one or two exceptions, this was an age of minor authors. When towards the end of the nineties the Bulletin Company began to issue in book-form the work of some of their contributors over the past years, there appeared such volumes as E. J. Brady's *The Ways of Many Waters* (1899), Roderic Quinn's *The Hidden Tide* (1899), and *The Circling Hearths* (1901), James Hebblethwaite's *A Rose of Regret* (1900), Louise Mack's *Dreams in Flower* (1901), and Hubert Church's *The West Wind* (1902). W. H. Ogilvie's *Fair Girls and Gray Horses* had appeared in 1898, and Victor Daley's *At Dawn and Dusk* was published by Angus and Robertson in the same year. This is a sampling of the average poets of the nineties: all are writers of the second or third rank. The short-story writers (again with one or two exceptions) will be found of the same calibre. *The Bulletin Story-Book*, published in 1901, is A. G. Stephens' own choice from the work of the previous decade, and half of it is now almost unreadable. Though Dr. Mackaness' selection in his *Australian Short Stories* (1928) leaves a more favourable impression, it helps confirm that the short-story writers of the nineties—Dorrington, Dyson, Favenc, Louis Becke, Randolph Bedford—are authors whose reputation rests on one or two stories in anthologies; any wider acquaintance with their work is likely to prove damaging.

This is the kind of judgment that would be made, I believe, could we view the period with the necessary detachment. The majority of the nineties school would be assessed as writers of minor talent. The main obstacle to this detachment, in the evaluation of the nineties generally, I have still to discuss. It is, broadly, the confusion of the literary importance of the period with its historical importance. When the writing of the nineties is taken to express the dawn of a national consciousness, dealing freely with indigenous material and reflecting the democratic spirit of the time, we must insist that such processes cannot of themselves confer any literary merit on the period, and that the nineties cannot be placed higher or lower than any other phase of Australian literature solely by reference to movements like these. To the political historian, the attainment of national self-consciousness may be a memorable and important event: to the literary historian, who must evaluate its aesthetic consequences in the writing of the period, it may be a calamity. To the student of Australian social development, a poet like O'Dowd, with his democratic fervour and his vision of the Australia of the future, may be of the highest interest: yet the literary critic may diagnose that these same elements in O'Dowd's work are the source of his failure as a poet. While the political or social historian may be

dealing with literary material, his interest in it is a non-literary interest and his judgment of it is a non-literary judgment : the two standards must not be confounded. The main hindrance to a critical assessment of the nineties in literature is that the two standards have been confounded. As the writing of the time reflects the attainment of a national consciousness, enthusiasm for the democratic ideal, and a growing use of native material, the belief arises that it must be of superior literary merit to any period before.

That issue can be decided, however, only by examining the æsthetic effect of these movements in the literature itself. Some consequences are clearly favourable. The tendency of writers to deal with the Australian environment they know helps rid their work of artificiality, and their patriotic and democratic temper gives vigour and animation to what they write—all critics of the balladists and short-story writers have responded to their robust and exuberant spirit. Yet it remains true, I think, that literature inspired by national sentiment or by the zeal of the reformer is artistically the most insecure of all, and in Australian literature in the nineties, this insecurity is always present. It is felt as Victor Daley addresses himself to the subject of "The Woman at the Washtub" :

The Woman at the Washtub,  
 She works till fall of night ;  
 With soap, and suds and soda  
 Her hands are wrinkled white.  
 Her diamonds are the sparkles  
 The copper-fire supplies ;  
 Her opals are the bubbles  
 That from the suds arise.

The Woman at the Washtub  
 Has lost the charm of youth ;  
 Her hair is rough and homely,  
 Her figure is uncouth ;  
 Her temper is like thunder,  
 With no one she agrees—  
 The children of the alley  
 They cling around her knees . . .

O Woman at the Washtub,  
 And do you ever dream  
 Of all your days gone by in  
 Your aureole of steam ?  
 From birth till we are dying  
 You wash our sordid duds,  
 O Woman of the Washtub !  
 O Sister of the Suds !

This is a piece of social commentary which Daley does not intend to be comic, but the poem can hardly be read with a straight face. Victor Daley is not notable as a thinker, but if we turn from him to the most intellectual of the poets writing in the democratic cause, then in Bernard O'Dowd we shall find the same rift between purpose and achievement—a visionary passion which founders in inflated language and rhetorical mannerism. In social history O'Dowd's work is interesting for the ideas that motivate it, but to literary criticism the main interest of his work is clinical.

I have yet to discuss the two writers who are central to the nineties tradition, Henry Lawson and Joseph Furphy. It may be asked whether this same patriotic and egalitarian sentiment whose literary consequences are so deplorable, is not responsible for the enduring value of their work. If we did value Lawson as the voice of the new land speaking, the spokesman of the underdog and the opponent of class privilege, then we should remember him not as a short-story writer, but as a poet. For it is in his verse, in poems like "The Star of Australasia" and "Faces in the Street", that this side of Lawson finds untrammelled expression. Though his reputation as a poet was high in the nineties and after, the passage of time has shown that the part of Lawson's work that is avowedly nationalistic is exactly the part that has proved most perishable: his reputation to-day must stand or fall by his work in prose. In his prose—with the exception of a few stories like "Arvie Aspinall's Alarm-Clock" and "Two Boys at Grinder Bros"—Lawson escapes the hazards to which he succumbs as a social critic or reformer in verse, as he escapes also the artistic dangers besetting the use of "local colour". Lawson's way of giving literary expression to the Australian environment is to take it for granted, and get on with the story. He does not give the effect of self-consciousness, found in so many of his contemporaries—the impression that they must have lain awake at night thinking how "Australian" their work should be. If Lawson has put on record for ever the Australia of the track, the shanty, the shearing-shed, and the camp-fire, he has done so largely by assuming them as part of the world with which his stories deal.

Joseph Furphy is the second major figure whose work has been taken as the embodiment of the nineties in literature. What better literary monument could the period have than *Such is Life*? The title, we are told, corresponds to the last words spoken by Ned Kelly before he was hanged, and Furphy described the book to J. F. Archibald as "a full-sized novel . . . scene, Riverina and Northern Vic; temper, democratic; bias, offensively Australian".<sup>6</sup> Here indeed is a reflection of the social and political spirit of the nineties in literature—one critic has even been able to distil a political philosophy from *Such is Life* (and *Rigby's Romance*) into a pamphlet of some seventy pages.<sup>7</sup>

*Such is Life* will detain us for some little time, for no other book written in the nineties serves so well to show how far the valuation of a work by non-literary criteria may diverge from a strictly literary valuation. At first sight, the novel seems to

<sup>6</sup> Letters of 4 April, 1897, quoted Miles Franklin, *Joseph Furphy* (1944), p. 50.

<sup>7</sup> J. K. Ewers, *Tell the People!* (Unpopular Pamphlets, No. 5) [1943].

conform to the description—temper democratic, bias offensively Australian—and its unsophisticated character is borne out by the formal plan. It is a plotless novel, Furphy's procedure being to amplify the record of a pocket-diary for 1883: he proposes first to present the events of each day of one week (dividing the book into seven chapters accordingly), and then to take instead one day of each of seven months. The chapters are linked because the same narrator appears in them all, but he is careful to warn that "the thread of narrative being thus purposely broken, no one of these short and simple analyses can have any connection with another", and the reader is "thereby tacitly warned against any expectation of plot or denouement, and so secured against disappointment".<sup>8</sup>

*Such is Life* was accepted at this valuation for many years, as a rambling and artless chronicle that enabled Furphy to indulge his reflective bent. But gradually critics came to realise that there were hidden connections between the events so casually described, one incident illuminating another many pages distant: that behind the apparent inconsequence of his narrative Furphy had woven a most intricate pattern of cause and effect—bearing out the hint of his title, that such is life. A particular refinement of his technique is that the narrator, Tom Collins, is made to reveal the hidden significance of the events he describes without ever perceiving it himself: while the facts Collins relates may be accepted as reliable evidence, his interpretations of the facts have usually to be set aside—the reader is left to discover, through Collins' agency, the truth to which Collins himself remains blind. As Furphy explained in an unsigned notice of the book in *The Bulletin*:

"Underneath this obvious dislocation of anything resembling continuous narrative run several undercurrents of plot, manifest to the reader, though ostensibly unnoticed by the author. . . . In fact, the studied inconsecutiveness of the 'Memoirs' is made to mask intricate coincidences and cross-purposes."<sup>9</sup>

*Such is Life* is of a more subtle design than first appears. Furphy wishes to dispense with the artificialities and restrictions of "plot" and involve a technique to present life in a more realistic way: to indicate the secret connection between apparently unrelated happenings, to show how our knowledge of events must always be partial and imperfect, to exhibit the role of chance and accident in human affairs, to explore the whole problem of causation. Furphy came to literature (or returned to literature) late in life, and contemplated writing one work that would be the fruit of all his varied experience as teamster and selector, of all his reading, all his reflection: finding the conventional novel inadequate for his purpose, he devised a more subtle form of his own. *Such is Life* was not intended as a literary hoax: some inkling of

<sup>8</sup> *Such is Life* (1945 edition), p. 64.

<sup>9</sup> Furphy's own account of his book was printed as an advertisement for *Such is Life* on the inside back cover of *The Bulletin*, 30 July, 1903.



Furphy's aims as a writer may be gained from the advice he gave Miles Franklin on the publication of *My Brilliant Career* :

" If you can only retain the picturesque freshness of that book, whilst acquiring method in construction, and a patient faith in the Scheme of the Universe—that is to say, a rational appraisalment of the value of life, and a definite theory of its purpose—you will assuredly do work that will make the rest of us seem as grasshoppers ".<sup>10</sup>

" A rational appraisalment of the value of life, and a definite theory of its purpose " : this is the motive of the intricate pattern of cause and effect which Furphy traces through his narrative. While the book may have a temper that is democratic and a bias that is offensively Australian, these are surface features, inessential to its permanent literary worth. The value set upon the novel by the social historian is largely irrelevant to its value as literature : *Such is Life* is memorable not as showing a stage in the evolution of the Australian democratic ideal, but as an exploration of the abiding problems of destiny and freewill, moral responsibility, and the operation of chance in the universal scheme—problems which have engaged writers not of Furphy's period only, but of all periods, and which are still in no imminent danger of solution.

It is instructive that the intention and quality of *Such is Life* were not understood in Furphy's own day. He had to wait until the nineteen-forties for an audience to appreciate him. This points to the last feature of the nineties that I wish to discuss : the *limitation* it imposed on Australian writing, and on the criticism of Australian writing, which has been its main heritage to the present. In a recent issue of the *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Claude T. Bissell has drawn a parallel between the development of Australian literature and Canadian literature in this respect. The early writing in each dominion, as it imitated the more mature English tradition, tended to be elegant rather than crude, sophisticated rather than naive ; then as literature developed and a national consciousness emerged, this early writing came to be identified with the effete and the false, and there arose " the myth that all literature which is patently derivative is bad, and all unsophisticated literature is good ".<sup>11</sup> This process was duplicated in Australia in the nineties, and Australian literature has been long outgrowing the limitation then imposed—it may not have completely outgrown it now. The ballad verse of the nineties was good poetry of its kind, but if it leads to a demand that all poetry should be of that kind, literary development is arrested. It was well for the writers of the nineties to deal boldly with Australian material, but as the tradition has descended to their successors, novelists have come to believe that their main function is to celebrate the outback, as the only material left that is unequivocally " Australian ". The fashions set in the nineties, I think it is true to say, help explain why so much modern Australian verse

<sup>10</sup> Cited by Miles Franklin, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

<sup>11</sup> C. T. Bissell, " A Common Ancestry : Literature in Australia and Canada ", *U.T.Q.*, Vol. XXV (1955-56), pp. 131-142.

is concerned with transcripts of environment, why the novel of city life has been slow to establish itself, and why traditions of the less "extravert" kind, in both prose and verse, have so tardily won acceptance.

If we were to evaluate the nineties by strictly literary standards, then, we should find that the mass of writers are men of minor talent, living through a poem or two in an anthology or a contribution to a collection of short stories; we should find that of the two major figures, Lawson and Furphy, Lawson is memorable not for the part of his work—his verse—that reflects the temper of the age, but for the part that transcends it, while Furphy's work is important not for its democratic temper or offensively Australian bias, but for its exploration of issues that are not local, but universal in their reference. The political verse of Bernard O'Dowd is now mainly of clinical interest, Banjo Paterson is read by schoolboys. The best poetry written at the time, the poetry of Chris Brennan, is unrelated to social and political movements, as is the work of the most notable novelist to emerge, Henry Handel Richardson. The nationalistic, patriotic, radical tendencies in the writing of the period assure it a place in Australian social history, but its place in Australian literary history must remain in doubt so long as we continue to derive its identity as a period from features such as these.