

## THE CONTEXT OF AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE\*

By LEONIE KRAMER

IN the year 1849 a debate of unusual interest and importance was in progress in a Select Committee of the Legislative Council of New South Wales. Its subject was the foundation of a university in Sydney. One might have supposed that the subject would have offered an opportunity for a display of eloquence in a good cause, and that the public would have been anxious to discover how many reasons could be found for establishing the first university in Australia. Instead, the occasion proved that no cause is so good that one cannot find someone to oppose it; no doubt a proposal to start the millennium tomorrow would find an opponent who had set aside the day for more important business of his own. And so it was with the debate of 1849. William Charles Wentworth fought the critics of the proposal with energy and enthusiasm. John Dunmore Lang felt compelled to reply to those who were only too ready to insist that, given the state of the colony and its population, such a venture could never be successful; that education in Australia could never match, let alone replace, education in England; that the university would starve for want of students; that its standards must inevitably fall below those required of a reputable university. Indeed, for the first two decades of this university's existence, it seemed that the pessimists might be justified. For in that time no more than an average of thirteen students a year were enrolled. The academic plant was frailer than Wentworth and Lang could possibly have predicted.

I recall these events because they are not without a parallel in the more recent history of this university. In 1956 some enterprising and optimistic people formed a committee to raise money for a Chair of Australian Literature. I can well remember the arguments I heard urged against their efforts. There was not enough Australian literature, it was said, to justify a chair in the subject. Australian literature was not, and never would be, of equal value with English literature. It was parochial, concerned with the narrow interests of a small-minded community, preoccupied with local colour, shallow in its ideas and crude in its techniques. These criticisms were made not by uninformed people, but by some academics, and more surprisingly, some writers. Sometimes it seemed as though the few enthusiasts were bound to be disheartened by detractors dedicated to proving the truth of the accusation that Australians enjoy nothing more keenly than the denigration of their own achievements. In my experience, as many people were found to scoff at the possibility of the academic study of Australian literature as to encourage it.

Against this background, then, Professor Wilkes in 1962 became the foundation professor of Australian literature. His circumstances, if not his feelings, were in fact distinctly comparable with those of the foundation professors of this university. He faced the enormously difficult task of justifying his own existence, not only to those unbelievers who would in any case be disposed to doubt it, but also to those who might have been expected to know better—some of his fellow-academics, some writers, critics and students. He also had to demonstrate that Australian literature was academically respectable—a phrase used with surprising frequency by people who believe themselves to be progressive, or even radical. In the time he occupied the chair—from late 1962 until 1966—he established

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courses which alone are an answer to the sceptics. He encouraged research into Australian literature by his own example, and by training students as candidates for higher degrees. These are tangible evidences of his activity. But perhaps more important even than the institution of courses and the growth of research is the fact that during his term of office the academic study of Australian literature—and, if you like, its respectability—came to be acknowledged. It is true that shortly after I joined the university I met a gentleman who, on being introduced to me, said "What Australian literature?" But that one no longer meets such people and such questions nearly every day is a tribute to the work of my predecessor.

Thanks to Professor Wilkes, then, I enter a department where there is enthusiasm among both staff and students for the subject, and to which already students from overseas have been attracted. But I do not imagine that there is no more pioneering to be done. It is no longer necessary to prove that Australian literature ought to be taught, and can be taught. Precisely because Professor Wilkes set such firm foundations for the subject it is now possible, so it seems to me, for us to explore, and diversify approaches to the study of Australian literature. We must be concerned with matters of both principle and practice. I start with the assumption that we in the university have accepted Australian literature. What we have not yet done, it seems to me, is attempt a definition of its relationship with the study of literature as a whole, and English literature in particular. We have not established its context, nor have we in any real sense explored its special value and its problems.

It is best to begin with problems. We have first of all to face the fact that there is not enough Australian literature to constitute a full course of study for a pass student, let alone an honours one. Our position today might be likened to that of an English university in the seventeenth century, had it wanted to devise a course in English literature. But English universities were wise or timid enough to postpone the formation of English schools until the twentieth century. Only from 1908 were students at Oxford able to give more emphasis to literature than language; the Cambridge English Tripos was instituted in 1917. By this time the subject had acquired a respectable past—a past so respectable that the University of Oxford at least could afford to ignore its present altogether. Until recently the study of English literature at Oxford ceased at 1830; that date has now been extended to 1900. To return to my comparison. It would not have been possible, in the mid-seventeenth century, to construct a full English literature course, without having recourse to figures so minor that they could hardly have been included, or without bolstering the course with historical and language studies to give it weight and substance. A modern English course of the kind with which we are familiar, one which exists by asserting, in principle or practice, its independence of historical studies and to a large extent of linguistic ones, would simply not have been possible.

I hope that nobody now wishes to argue that we too should have postponed the academic teaching of Australian literature for another two hundred years. There are disadvantages in our present situation only if we are content to accept without question the formulas for the construction of courses of study that have been applied since the introduction of English literature as an academic study. And I also believe that we will greatly exaggerate the disadvantages of our

situation if we ignore the special kind of value that attaches to study of our own literature.

It is not my intention to rehearse the many arguments that have been advanced in recent years about the value of literature in education. I want merely to remind you that these arguments have been and still are advanced largely because of the state of the subject at the present time, and in particular because of the enormous expansion of literature in English, and the accessibility, through good translations, of much foreign literature that could previously be studied only by people with a command of several languages. I think it is true to say that there are few teachers of literature these days who are not seriously exercised by the problems presented by the sheer size of their subject, and by the awareness that they must inevitably omit from any course, however carefully planned, much that is valuable and interesting. And since literature, like any of the arts, is so much a matter of individual taste, we can never be certain that we are not failing to give any one of our students that very material which might spark his individual intelligence and enthusiasm. We have to make choices, knowing them to be partial, and knowing ourselves to be fallible. Fortunately it is no longer possible to be complacent about the subject literature. Faced with the rapid expansion of the subject, we can no longer assume that courses will plan themselves. We have to be more selective, more courageous, more ready to experiment. In particular, in treating Australian literature, we have to be prepared to examine, not only its literary context, but its relationship to other Australian studies.

And first of all, we have to recognize the special value that attaches to Australian literature for us because it is Australian. I do not intend to revive the crude nationalistic arguments for Australian literature that are at last beginning to lose their force; nor to reinvoké the double standard of judgement—one set of values for Literature, and another for Australian literature—that still haunts our criticism. Without falling into either of these traps, it can sensibly be argued that while the best literature of any country has value for people outside that country, our own literature offers us a peculiar pleasure and interest.

To begin with it has one important advantage. It is made out of the world and society in which we live, and does for this reason speak to us with particular force in a familiar language. Let me illustrate what I mean by taking two poems. The first is Wordsworth's "Westminster Bridge":

Earth has not anything to show more fair:  
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by  
A sight so touching in its majesty:  
This City now doth, like a garment, wear  
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,  
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie  
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;  
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.  
Never did sun more beautifully steep  
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;  
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!  
The river glideth at his own sweet will:  
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;  
And all that mighty heart is lying still!

To a reader who has not seen Westminster Bridge that sonnet will, I should suppose, give what otherwise would be only a dimly imagined scene, something of the force of concrete reality. We are enabled to see it with the poet's eyes. But a reader familiar with the scene brings a different attitude to it. It might strike him with the force of recognition; or he might be jerked out of his sense of familiarity, and made to see it afresh, ordered and recreated by the poet's imagination. In either case, however, the indigenous reader is able, in fact compelled to measure the poet's statement against his own direct knowledge of the real world. He has a relationship to the poem different in kind from that of the reader who has no direct knowledge of the scene at all. Now let us take my second poem, "Terra Australis" by James McAuley:

Voyage within you, on the fabled ocean,  
And you will find that Southern Continent,  
Quiros' vision—his hidalgo heart  
And mythical Australia, where reside  
All things in their imagined counterpart.

It is your land of similes: the wattle  
Scatters its pollen on the doubting heart;  
The flowers are wide-awake; the air gives ease.  
There you come home; the magpies call you Jack  
And whistle like larrikins at you from the trees.

There too the angophora preaches on the hillsides  
With the gestures of Moses; and the white cockatoo,  
Perched on his limbs, screams with demoniac pain;  
And who shall say on what errand the insolent emu  
Walks between morning and night on the edge of the plain?

But northward in valleys of the fiery Goat  
Where the sun like a centaur vertically shoots  
His raging arrows with unerring aim,  
Stand the ecstatic solitary pyres  
Of unknown lovers, featureless with flame.

Without making an evaluative comparison between the two poems, it would surely be true to say that for an Australian reader the second poem makes direct contact in the way that the Wordsworth sonnet does not. To make a crude distinction one might say that whereas the Wordsworth poem makes the unfamiliar concrete, the McAuley poem makes the familiar new. It also invites from the reader scrutiny of a different kind, since he is able to assess the *accuracy* of the poem. On these terms it is possible to compare the two poems without invoking special standards of judgement for the one or the other. It is possible too to see that literature which can rely upon a degree of particular knowledge in its readers is likely to evoke a different kind of reaction from them—even I would suggest, a more stringent critical reaction. The foreign reader can hardly question Wordsworth's poem in terms of his own experience. The Australian reader of James McAuley's poem can hardly avoid measuring, and perhaps questioning, the poem in terms of the direct knowledge he shares with the poet. But the process is a two-way exchange. "Terra Australis" might invite a challenge from its Australian

reader, but it also issues one; it challenges the reader's awareness of his familiar world and his understanding of what he sees.

It could be objected that I have argued here from a very special case. Not all literature makes verifiable statements of the kind I have been discussing, and not all literature reflects so closely local colour. The objection is a valid one. A great deal of the writing that we most value—lyrical poetry for example—is entirely remote from the particularities that give to the two poems their striking national identity. Our experience of private states of feeling, rather than public conditions of life, is addressed in Shakespeare's sonnets, or Donne's love poems or Judith Wright's and R. D. FitzGerald's personal lyrics. But a great deal of Australian literature—as perhaps of any literature—is concerned with verifiable fact, and I sometimes wonder whether we do not take certain kinds of writing to be fiction because the facts to which they refer are no longer accessible to us.

We have little excuse for uncertainty about our own literature, whose history is short and accessible. Australian fiction, for example, is traditionally, and to a large extent still documentary in character. In the earliest novels of emigrant, convict and pastoral life, in the work of Furphy, Lawson, Henry Handel Richardson, Kylie Tennant, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Hal Porter and Martin Boyd, documentation—the exact representation of particular times and places—is of the first importance, however far beyond facts the individual writer might extend his imagination. And where a writer depends heavily upon facts, where indeed one of his claims to our attention must be that he is offering an interpretation of, or drawing conclusions about, particular circumstances, it is important that we be able to accept his account of those circumstances; that he be sufficiently accurate, in a word, to gain our confidence in his interpretations, or in his imaginative extensions of them. To the extent that a writer adapts facts to his own purpose—as Patrick White does in *Voss*—he tells us something of the first importance about his intentions and the direction of his work.

If, then, we acknowledge the close relationship between much of our literature and the conditions of life out of which it grew, we are beginning to define a context for it. To see Australian literature from this angle is to see it in the context of an actual physical and mental environment. Naturally, some forms of literature will more closely reflect environment than others. Fiction and drama are by their very nature more committed to the facts of social conditions than all but a few kinds of poetry. But even writing apparently lacking local colour and reference can be illuminated in unexpected ways by being set in the context not just of its time, but of its related arts. It has often enough been remarked that the earliest Australian poets were at pains to try to accommodate the English poetic traditions they inherited to the surprising and often alarming facts of the Australian landscape as they saw it. Verse forms and styles which had celebrated the skylark, the nightingale and the English spring and autumn, might well have seemed ill-adapted to sing the praises of the mopoke, the kookaburra and the lonely splendour of an Australian forest. The struggles of the poets to articulate their feelings seem much more significant when one compares them with the efforts of some early painters to tame the Australian landscape on the canvas, and to turn the irregularity of gums and the littered undergrowth of the forest floor to the well-groomed contours of an English park. Indeed, the relationship between Australian painting and literature throughout the whole of its history is a subject very much in need of exploration.

I do not share the fears of some teachers of literature that the independent value of literary studies is endangered if literature is brought too closely into contact with the conditions of its growth. Of course the best literature has a value quite independent of its historical or sociological interest. But to acknowledge this fact is not at the same time logically to consign the study of literature to artificial isolation. Students who can bring to bear knowledge of history and the other arts on the study of their own literature are likely to make much more sense of it. Looked at from this point of view, the proper context of Australian literature would seem to be, not English literature, but Australian history and the arts; and my nearest academic colleagues to be not those in the English department, but those in the Departments of History, Government, Economics and Fine Arts.

So far I have been concerned, in the main, to put Australian literature in touch with its own past. That is only half the battle. The last twenty-five years have seen an extraordinary growth in creative activity in this country, and a corresponding increase in critical attention to Australian writers. Students reading Australian literature at the university will inevitably want and need to be concerned very largely with modern writers, whose context is our context, who are living and working among us. They should, I would hope, feel the excitement of the publication of a new book of verse, or a new novel; and if reading means anything to them at all, they should want to discuss it while it is still fresh—preferably before it has been parcelled up and despatched by reviewers and critics.

Yet how can they do this, or indeed study the works of active contemporary writers, without turning what should be an investigation of a particularly exciting kind into a routine exercise? For it is an unfortunate fact that academic methods and procedures do not guarantee, indeed might actually threaten, the welfare of the living writer. Most lectures by their very nature aim at the systematic examination of a subject; they lean heavily upon the notion of important points to be made and remembered; they aim at tidying up difficulties, solving problems, arriving at conclusions. That is all very well when one is dealing with the Hundred Years' War, or even with a writer of whose work some kind of total view can be formulated. But what of the work of the writer who lives and works on our doorstep; who, even while we discuss his latest poem, is probably writing one which will make nonsense of all our conclusions, however tentative; who, if he knew of those conclusions, would probably laugh them out of court? Kenneth Slessor once expressed his amusement at the fact that he was being compared with T. S. Eliot whom he had never read; and more recently A. D. Hope has predicted that one day a busy scholar will construct an elaborate thesis about his poem "Pseudodoxia Epidemica", proving its relationship to Sir Thomas Browne's treatise, though he has never read Browne's *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*. However imperfectly the poet can recall the exact occasion or origins of a poem, or however mysterious the process of its creation might, on reflection, appear to him, he has the advantage of his readers.

His advantage, however, is a proper one, and one of which readers should constantly remind themselves. Students of modern Australian literature are in this respect in a peculiarly fortunate situation. They can, from time to time, hear poets read their poetry; they can hear writers talk about their own work and that of other writers; they can, at times, exchange views with them and ask them questions. For them literature ought to be an exciting living fact, and they

should be aware that it exists not to help them make up their minds, or decide between competing critical formulae, but to disturb facile judgements, to stimulate discussions to which there will not be neat conclusions, to provoke questions, not to answer them. Given this kind of emphasis, and a method of testing which does not demand general assessments, nor invite students to consign to heaven or hell writers who may live another thirty years to confound the best critical theories, the study of modern Australian literature can have a special value in the university. And its chief value might well be to establish a proper sense of priorities; to persuade critics and academics to see themselves as promoters whose occupational hazard is to be transformed into parasites. In the poem "Flying Crooked" Douglas Stewart offers a pertinent comment:

It was a shy poetic person  
 Wandering zigzag through his garden  
 Who saw how just by flying crooked,  
 Rather from habit than from fear,  
 The butterfly defeats the wicked;  
 The peewee marked it in the air  
 But when it dived down sharp and fierce  
 The butterfly was somewhere else.  
 And laughed to think that even now  
 When critics perch on every bough  
 To pounce, to murder and dissect,  
 They may not catch what they expect  
 And poetry still may flutter free  
 From Dr. Peewee, Ph.D.

The critic's proper relationship to literature is that of servant to master, though a servant, be it said, who should not allow his master to go about with his shoes undone or his hat on back-to-front.

Perhaps I might clinch this section of my argument with one illustration of the need for a sense of history and a sense of the living values of literature. I have not invented the example—it is a real one. The writer is offering some explanatory comments about A. D. Hope's poem "Death of a Bird":

“. . . To complete our appraisal of this poem we should, I feel, relate this poem to some things not immediately within its sphere. We have observed that it was conceived in an orderly manner, and great attention given to rhyme and metre. Related to this is this sense of 'verbal impressionism' which contributes to the sense of pathos towards the end. Thus this poem is a Romantic conception (as opposed to Classical). Hope's life span 1863-1933 was carried over the great era of Romanticism in the Fine Arts, not only in literature, but in painting (The French Impressionists), music (Debussy, Widor, Elgar) and architecture (the eclectic monstrosities of Victorian England—Butterfield, Barry, Pugin) and he would doubtless have been influenced by this movement in his writings. His novels show signs of romantic influence, and of them the 'Prisoner of Zenda' is well known for this. I feel that we can call 'The Death of a Bird' a literary masterpiece of its type, conceived with a healthy spirit of liveliness, clarity and colour:—three prime requisites, I feel, of good poetry."

To see past and present Australian life in its relationship to literature is to see only one of the possible contexts of Australian literature. Another context has traditionally been, and must continue to be, the tradition of English literature. There is little to be said on this point, which has often enough been argued. The influence of particular literary forms, and of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century modes of thinking and writing upon Australian literature is common knowledge. But I have one observation to make. There is not a direct relationship between Australian literature and the whole of the English tradition, nor can a student be expected to make a thorough study of his own literature and of the parent literature as well. So to define Australian literature's place within English literature involves two different things. It involves making a decision about values, and making a separate decision about relevance. The decision about values means taking a view about who are the important writers in English literature, irrespective of historical or other considerations. This question is of particular importance in the period up to the mid-eighteenth century, because later English literature has a more direct influence upon Australian literature. My answer to it is that a basic list of English writers up to the end of the eighteenth century must include Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, the metaphysical poets and Blake.

My second decision—about relevance—is of a different kind, and assumes a different view of the study of literature. For the student of Australian literature the influential period of English literature is from the middle of the eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth. Whereas my first decision would be based on views about the intrinsic value of the writers I have named, my second decision (while not disregarding the intrinsic merits of certain writers) would have more to do with the usefulness or interest of English literature in relation to Australian literature. And so my second list might well include, as well as the romantic and Victorian poets, and novelists such as Scott, Dickens and Thackeray, more minor figures such as Cowper, Collins and Gray, Trollope, Charles and Henry Kingsley, Disraeli and Arnold Bennett. In other words I do not believe that Australian literature fits automatically into a general context of English literature. It both needs and deserves special accommodation.

I am well aware that what I have just said amounts to a confession. Many of the arguments, and at least some of the wars that have been fought over the value of literary studies have started with attempts to define for them a single aim. The question so often asked or implied is "What is the value of literature?" or "What is the purpose of literary study?" The only reasonably accurate answer to either of these questions is one that converts the singular to the plural. There are different kinds of values in the study of literature, and many kinds of reasons for studying it. Further, these reasons change from time to time, may be held simultaneously, and are often directly related to the nature of the work being studied. Even a minor work may have a special interest; even one which neither aspires to greatness nor approaches it may throw light on some area of knowledge. In stating this pluralistic view I am simply trying to face up to the facts. In the most academically respectable of English courses there will inevitably be found works—notably among the minor prose and drama of the seventeenth century—whose value is historical rather than intrinsic. This need not cause alarm, as long as we recognize that literature courses are not, and cannot be, wholly devoted

to works of undisputed genius—for one simple reason, that if one were to attempt to construct such a course, there would be so few names on it that it would be more modest even than present courses in Australian literature. The only honest procedure is to recognize that most literature, like most painting and music, is susceptible to fashion and taste. When baroque is in, romantic is out. When D. H. Lawrence falls, as perhaps he shows signs of doing, Milton may well rise again. None of these facts need be disturbing, except to those who are persuaded that to teach literature is to teach permanent values. To teach literature is rather to teach how values may be discovered. Teaching values too easily degenerates into making assertions about matters which are not facts at all. The first question to settle about any literary work is not what value it has, but what it is. There is some hope that those who learn to see what is there will also learn to value what is there. There is little hope that those who begin with assumptions about value will come to grips with facts. They will learn to assert, but not to read.

So far I have suggested two kinds of contexts for Australian literature—its native historical, social and artistic context, and the context of its parent literature. But there is a third context which neither child nor parent can afford to ignore. It is not possible to assume that the relationship between Australian and English literature is a fixed and enduring one. In the 180 years of our history it has already undergone a very considerable change. Charles Harpur, Henry Kendall and Adam Lindsay Gordon were close to their English models. But before the turn of the last century other influences penetrated our literature. Henry Handel Richardson's novels have their affinities with the European rather than with the English tradition in fiction, and Brennan's models are to be sought in France, not in England. Today the divergence is more marked. Modern Australian poets seem to me to have little if anything in common with their English counterparts, and there is no reason to suppose that our literature will not continue to diverge as much from its English parentage as American literature has done. To say this is not to deny English literature a central place in the academic life of a country of English-speaking origins and traditions. But while universities are committed, among other things, to preserving and handing on the knowledge of the past, it is also their responsibility to acknowledge the facts of the present. To do this might well be one of their most difficult tasks.

The third possible context for Australian literature is, then, that vast body of achievement, literature itself. There are at least two ways of looking at this. One is to relate Australian literature to its modern neighbours, to what is somewhat misleadingly called Commonwealth literature—which is perhaps better described as literature in English. A course in this subject—which includes Indian, West African, South African, West Indian and Canadian literature—is already being taught in the University of Adelaide. Comparisons between Canadian and Australian literature, or between New Zealand and Australian literature, can prove fruitful to those interested in the origins and development of national traditions, and may, indeed, provide an antidote to some of the cruder criticisms of provincialism now current.

Interesting though these recent developments are, however, I prefer for the moment to place the emphasis upon the second aspect of the relationship between Australian literature and literature as a whole. Perhaps I might explain myself by using a musical analogy. One of the great difficulties in designing a course

in English literature is simply the extraordinary variety and richness of some five hundred years of literary history. A difficulty of the opposite kind, however, would confront anyone determined, for patriotic or other reasons, to design a course in English music. Would academic respectability be allowed to a course which offered a study of the symphony, the sonata, or the concerto without Beethoven? Or Mozart? Or Brahms? Without any French, German or Russian music at all? This would be like a study of painting without the Italian Renaissance, or a study of drama without the plays of Shakespeare. Indeed, if one looks at the problem in perspective, can it be denied that English literature is unquestionably unchallenged only in one area—represented by one man, Shakespeare? Other European literatures offer poetic wealth the average student of English literature knows nothing about, and for all its variety and richness English literature cannot provide a novelist of the stature of Tolstoy.

I hope that I shall not be misunderstood on this question. I do not believe that there is such a thing as an adequate translation of poetry. Therefore any student who wishes to read foreign poetry properly must read it in the original language. On the other hand it is better to read a translation than not to read at all, and certainly, so far as novels and short stories are concerned, the gains greatly outweigh the losses. My point is that Australian literature, while it is part of history and society, and part of English literature, is part also of a formal structure, a context of forms and modes which are common to the Western European, not simply to the English tradition. To take a specific example. One of the particular strengths of Australian literature is and has been the short story. From the nineteenth century to the present day there is a wealth of material, well worth reading and discussing in its own right. But the short story is also part of a family, which, to go back only into its immediate past history, contains such distinguished members as Pushkin, Turgenev, Chekhov, de Maupassant, Conrad, Hawthorne, Twain, Thomas Mann, Kafka, James Joyce, Henry James—the problem is where to put the full stop. What is true of the Australian short story is also true of the novel and poetry. While on the one hand one can see connections between some nineteenth-century Australian novelists—Henry Kingsley, for example, and Dickens and Scott—looked at from another point of view even a faulty, minor novel belongs to a form, and asks to be seen not just in relation to its particular antecedent, but also in relation to remoter members of the family of which its creator might even have been ignorant. In poetry a particular example will serve. Some of Shaws Neilson's best poems refuse to be accommodated in either of the contexts I have mentioned earlier. They do not need history or politics to explain them, though impressionist painting might be to their taste; nor do they demand the support of the English tradition. As Professor A. R. Chisholm has shown, their affinities, surprising though these are in a way, are with the French symbolists. To have shown in relation to French literature the kind of poem that Neilson sometimes writes is to have given it a context in which it can better be understood.

The student of Australian literature, then, can be a student of Australian history, politics, economics and fine arts, or a student of carefully selected English literature, or a student of literature in general, of the family relationships of forms, modes and styles. Ideally, of course, he will try to get something of each world, and I am sure he can do so without being condemned to superficiality. Behind my

argument is distrust of isolationism, and anxiety to dispose of the notion that there is a special hat to be worn for Australian literature. One way of eradicating this idea is by demonstrating that Australian literature is entitled to several kinds of hats; that it can wear all of them with effect and some of them with distinction.

I have been suggesting that one cannot talk about the context of Australian literature without examining some of the assumptions that are made about literature in general, and especially about English literature. That English departments are so large today does not seem to me to be a law of nature. It is just conceivable that in the future they might shrink to the comfortable cosiness of classics departments, and that literature might once more become, what it so long was, the business of the educated man, not of the academy. An idle fancy perhaps, but one worth entertaining if only to rid oneself of some of the habits of thought induced by a long period of expansion and prosperity. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and even later, if a man, no matter how learned, had announced that in the future the teaching of classical literature in universities would be confined to a handful of students, and that English literature would take its place, who would have taken him seriously? Today we are gratified and astonished if any students of English literature read Virgil and Homer in translation. If they were to express a desire to study the Italian renaissance models upon which the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries so readily drew, we would probably be embarrassed by our own inadequacies. Is it *quite* impossible that in 350 years English literature will be in the same position? That in this country students of Australian literature will be in the position of students of medieval literature today—learning a language in order to read a literature; and that in less time still the Romantic and Victorian models for Australian literature will be as remote and unread as Ariosto, Petrarch, Sannazaro, Tasso and the rest?

Perhaps you are not very interested in the next 300 years. Perhaps I am not either. But I am interested in emphasizing that we in English departments have our own form of the population explosion to contend with. Too many writers; too many critics; too little time. We will have to give up some of our empire, and whether we decide to shrink to our own national boundaries or adopt an enlightened cosmopolitanism might be decided by our political, as much as by our literary, future. In the meantime, I think we might take seriously Lionel Trilling's expression of doubt about whether literary studies are still central, and whether they achieve at present what their early supporters hoped for them; or whether the very means we have employed to demonstrate the importance of literary studies might not now be endangering their health. Do we, in fact, deserve Douglas Stewart's description:

Truly they seem not quite what the age supposes,  
 Professors, learned assessors, unwilling to seek  
 The new and the strange, their old bespectacled noses  
 Questing like bumble-bees in the flowers of the Greek,  
 Their spare time spent in the cultivation of roses  
 With wild debauches of chess one night a week.  
 A kind of seagull, a closer view discloses,  
 A twinkling people, eager in legs and beak.

These are large questions, and I do not want to end on a pessimistic note on this occasion. Instead, I shall resurrect the words of Rev. William Woolls, who was inspired to verse by the events of the last century with which I began this lecture. His lines were written to commemorate the University Bill of 1850. They contain his vision of a university which would stem the tides of ignorance and barbarism, shelter the artist and the scientist, and give the native Australian a chance to develop his talents:

Rise, rise! Australia, chase the mists away  
Which far too long have held the light of day,  
Science and Art in thee shall find a home,  
Lo! o'er the distant wave in peace they come.  
No more shall native talent sigh in vain,  
And pine obscure in some far sunny plain,  
Nor unrewarded curse the ungrateful earth  
To which it owes no favour but its birth.  
In that vast pile which near the Cove shall rise  
Pointing its Gothic turrets to the skies,  
The poet yet shall wear the laurel crown,  
And every Art some bright distinction own.

I cannot praise Rev. William Woolls for his own poetic distinction. He is in no danger of appearing on the Australian literature course. Yet one can hardly quarrel with his sentiments, nor fail to be touched by his faith in a future he could not hope to see.