

## Why Australian Literature?

ELIZABETH WEBBY\*

When I finally gave in to persistent requests to deliver an inaugural lecture, I nominated the end of September as the fatal date, largely because it seemed sufficiently far off: still in the realm of things one would do someday. I did not realise the particular significance the month of September had in relation to the Chair of Australian Literature. Not only did G. A. Wilkes, the first holder of the Chair, take up his appointment on 3 September 1962—just over twenty-nine years ago—but Leonie Kramer, the second holder of the Chair, gave her inaugural lecture on 25 September 1968—23 years ago.

I have taken the precaution of reading the inaugural lectures given by my two predecessors—when doing something for the first time, it is usually wise at least to look at precedents, even if one doesn't follow them. Professor Wilkes spoke on 'The University and Australian Literature',<sup>1</sup> taking his title and starting point from an essay Christopher Brennan published in *Hermes* in 1902. Asked to write something to celebrate the University's Fiftieth Anniversary, Brennan, with tongue in cheek, wrote what he subtitled 'A Centenary Retrospect', ironically calling attention, from a supposed 1952 standpoint, to the little that had been done for 'Australia's now flourishing national art and literature' in the first fifty years of the University's existence.<sup>2</sup> Professor Kramer's title was 'The Context of Australian Literature'; her historical starting point was the 1849 NSW Legislative Council's debate about the foundation of the University.<sup>3</sup>

My own title has a much more recent and humble origin—a question, virtually the final question, asked during my interview for the Chair of Australian Literature early last year. 'Why Australian Literature?' was not a question I had been expecting and I had to ask

\**Professor of Australian Literature. This inaugural lecture was delivered on 26 September, 1991.*

for clarification—‘Isn’t literature literature?’, I was told. ‘Why do we need to single out Australian literature?’ My answer was a variation of one I’d given during the First Feminist Book Fortnight two years ago when asked why we needed to have a Feminist Book Fortnight. In an ideal world, I said, it might be possible to teach literature as literature without regard to nationality or gender, but that ideal world has not yet arrived.

Interestingly, Christopher Brennan, writing about the supposed supportive relationship between the University and Australian literature in 1952, from the perspective of how literature was actually being taught here in 1902, noted as an advantage the fact that ‘literature has here been taught always as an organic unity, without hostile frontiers of country or language’. Earlier this year I was asked, in the context of the celebration of the centenary of the History Department and the failure to celebrate the centenary of the Philosophy Department, whether the English Department had also failed to observe its centenary. Mungo MacCallum’s appointment in 1887 was, however, as Challis Professor of Modern Literature, not as Professor of English. The first professors of English were not appointed until 1921, so this is only our 70th anniversary, that is, as a separate department. Teaching of English, however, began in 1888 under MacCallum, so if that is the yardstick we have missed out by three years.

The decision to establish a Chair of Australian Literature here was made, then, in the context of already existing Chairs in English Literature and Early English Literature and Language within an entity called the Department of English. Perhaps at some time in the future we may become a School of English Language and Literatures in English, with additional Chairs in American Literature, Pacific Literature and all manner of desirable others, though this does indeed seem rather Utopian at the present time of contraction rather than expansion. Unlike Brennan—or Leonie Kramer, who, perhaps equally tongue-in-cheek, suggested that in 300 years most Australian students might know as little of English Literature as most present students do of classical—I’m not going to indulge in prophecy, even in jest.

While my questioner somewhat disconcerted me by asking ‘Why Australian literature?’, I was perhaps lucky that it was not an even

more disconcerting 'Why literature?' Both Professors Wilkes and Kramer, speaking in the 1960s after a period of rapid expansion in universities and in English Departments in this country, assumed that this question no longer *was* a question. Professor Wilkes, for example, noted: 'That there are valid reasons for the University study of literature itself I am taking for granted, as in an inaugural lecture in the Faculty of Arts I do not feel required to justify the existence of the Faculty to itself'. The very different nature of Australian universities and English Departments thirty years later requires us, increasingly, to make these sorts of justifications, even to ourselves. Increasingly, too, one is confronted by attacks on the nature of universities, and English Departments, like that made by Paul Johnson in the *Australian*, based on an extremely narrow-minded view of education as training, i.e. the acquisition of vocational skills. So, he claimed, medicine should be taught in hospitals, law in the courts, etc. The best he seemed to be able to find for English Departments to do was the teaching of handwriting and verse writing.

One might counter in protest that one of the most important functions of a university education is to prevent people thinking as narrowly and rigidly as Paul Johnson. No doubt he attended a university but, as Dorothy Green was fond of reminding us, humane studies do not make one humane. Whether written in jest or not, Brennan's 1902 essay provides a justification of the University which bears repeating today:

The capacities of a university for turning out poets are generally limited to a rudimentary sense of the verb; and our University has certainly not spoiled as many as it might have. But it has done noble and appreciable work in preparing the soil, the light, the atmosphere in which a literature might most favourably develop; in creating a community pervaded with a living sense of spiritual values, of the deeper unity of culture in all its forms, and carrying that sense into every daily act of its life, so that no corner is left for barbarism, vulgarity or materialism. Everyone who has graduated from our University, we might say without much exaggeration, has become a centre of such enlightenment for all about him; carrying away with him from his academic days something more than a mere improved capacity for earning his living, and a gift of platitude.

For this we have to thank both the governing and teaching bodies of our University, past and present.

The governing body, perhaps, most of all: for in their hands lay most power for good or evil. Never have they been seen to despair of the University. Never, even in the muddiest flow of the nineteenth century, have they sacrificed the idea of a University, saying 'Go to, we are modern men: what have we to do with these phantoms? Let us make veterinary surgeons, and, when horses are superseded, let us turn out automobile-engineers: for a new dispensation is come upon us, and these things alone are of value.' No: remember how they dared, under the leadership of him who will always be known as the Great Chancellor, to stem the current that howled about them, saying steadfastly, 'To our keeping has been entrusted an idea, *Universitas*—the unity of human culture throughout all its bewildering phases. Let these new developments be welcome; let them enrich us: but let them not seek to oust the ancient treasures; let them not claim to usurp the place of the idea which is more than they or any other temporal form, old or new. Let us feed the lamp and hand it on undimmed: in honour we can do no less.'

Picking up Brennan's idea of the University as being primarily concerned with 'human culture in all its phases', A. D. Hope in 1954, as quoted by Professor Wilkes in his inaugural lecture, had noted

If literature is recognised as one of their proper fields of study, the Universities as a whole should study literature as a whole wherever it exists, and Australian Universities have the right and the duty to see that the literature of their own country does not form a gap in the general body of studies.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, a gap only exists if perceived as such and many other University professors did not believe that there was any Australian Literature to study. The more usual question in the 1950s was not 'why Australian literature?' but 'what Australian literature?' Professor Kramer recalled in her inaugural lecture the arguments in the 1950s against the establishment of the Australian Literature Chair: 'Those criticisms were made not by uninformed people, but by some academics, and more surprisingly, some writers'. Even a decade or more later, as she noted, 'Shortly after I joined the University I met a gentleman who, on being introduced to me, said "What Australian literature?" '. I don't propose tonight to tell the many other stories about ignorant English professors and their chauvinistic comments on Australian literature or the lack of it.

There was a time when these were ritually told and retold at meetings of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature, just as feminists once swapped their horror stories of the elderly academics who kept inquiring when the Department of Men's Studies was to be established.

Part of my personal answer to 'why Australian literature', however, relates to the fact that I did perceive a gap in my study of literature here in the later 1950s and early 60s—a gap relating to my inability to study any Australian literature. There were, it is true, some lectures in this area in the English III Pass course but, at that time, they were unavailable to Honours students who did a separate Year III Course. I consequently knew very little about Australian literature—I had studied Douglas Stewart's *Fire in the Snow* at high school, been a long time fan of Banjo Paterson, and had read my Australian children's books from May Gibbs through to Mary Grant Bruce and Ethel Turner, but that was about it. In an attempt to fill this gap I decided to write my B.A. Honours thesis on an Australian author—in fact on H. H. Richardson, whom I had not of course read but felt some affinity with simply because she had been a boarder at P.L.C. Melbourne as I had at P.L.C. Sydney. I discussed this possible topic with G. A. Wilkes—not yet Professor of Australian Literature, though to become so later that same year—who asked if I was really sure I had anything new to say on H. H. R. (Unbeknown to me he had written his own B.A. Honours thesis on H. H. R. a dozen or so years earlier.) I went to Fisher Library, looked at the size and number of books by and about H. H. R. and decided I didn't—which is how I came to write on Patrick White and, a year later, to publish one of the first articles on his plays. (*The Ham Funeral* was performed in Sydney while I was in the midst of my thesis and happened, luckily, to fit in perfectly with my argument.)

Though I met no opposition to an Honours thesis on an Australian author in the early 1960s—indeed, another member of my year also wrote on Patrick White—and Professor Wilkes appears to have met none in the late 1940s—there was, it seems, more opposition a few years earlier. I recently read a manuscript by someone who claimed that she had been actively discouraged from writing on an Australian topic earlier in the 1940s. Yet, curiously enough, as I discovered when reading through old university calendars recently in an attempt

to discover if we really had forgotten the English Department's centenary, Australian literature was taught as an integral part of the English I course from 1940 through to 1952. The course contents were, as listed in the calendars:

- (a) The history of the English language, principles of composition, literary and practical, questions of 'good speech', including that of Australian pronunciation.
- (b) The development of English literature, with the reading of some prescribed works of Chaucer and Shakespeare, also of other selected English writers.
- (c) Australian Literature.

In 1953 Australian Literature moved out of English I to English III and so became much less available to students.

We are shortly to begin discussion of a new English I syllabus to take effect from 1994 and it seems that, forty years later, we might end up with something not all that different, at least in general terms, from the 1940 course, though we are probably unlikely to worry too much about 'good speech' let alone, despite Paul Johnson, good handwriting.

Of course, the texts we shall be teaching and how we shall be teaching them will be very different. If we are asked 'what Australian literature?' nowadays it is with a very different inflection, meaning not 'is there any?' but what, at the end of the twentieth century, do we mean by 'Australian', what by 'literature'? Both these terms have changed their meanings dramatically in the century since the 1890s when, it was believed, a 'genuine Australian literature' had finally been established. Brennan wrote, ironically, in 1902 of this nationalist school:

the Australianity of this literature, which largely dealt with and was mainly addressed to mythical individuals called Bill and Jim, was painted on, not too laboriously, from the outside. What ruined the school was that it forgot its main (and only) object after all and took to celebrating imported fauna, such as the horse and the jackeroo.

The concept of and the belief in the need for an essentially Australian literature began, however, many years before the 1890s. Reviewing the first collection of poems published in Australia by an Australian born poet, Charles Tompson's *Wild Notes from the Lyre*

*of a Native Minstrel* (1826), the *Sydney Gazette*'s critic called, as countless others were to afterwards, on Australian writers to write about what they could see around them rather than merely imitate English authors:

... we will merely suggest to Mr. Tompson the propriety of letting his similes and metaphors be purely Australian. He will soon find his account in doing so, as they will infallibly possess all the freshness of originality. In this respect he has decided advantage over all European poets, because here nature has an entirely different aspect. Let him select from the treasures by which he is surrounded—let nature be his exclusive study—and Australia will have it in her power to boast of the productions of her bard.<sup>5</sup>

We, of course, know that the processes of seeing, of writing and of reading are much more complicated and inter-related than this model allows. But it continued to be the dominant one, as critic after critic pointed to all the distinctive material waiting to be written about. Here is part of an article on 'Colonial Literature' published in Sydney in 1845:

'But we have no colonial literature, nor do I see any materials from which a literature purely colonial could be raised.'

'I wish you would abolish the use of the word "Colonial" at any rate with regard to literature, and call it either "Australian" or "National". Depend upon it that Australia will never be more than a cipher among the nations, until her sons assume to themselves national characteristics, and proudly stamp them by the pen to be acknowledged and admired by the world!'

'All very good,—but no answer to my position, that both literature and the materials for forming it are wanting to Australia. ...'

'Little has yet appeared, I grant you, to warrant the high ground I have chosen to take in this argument; yet of what has been published, so great a proportion is really good, that I cannot help repeating, that, with the same amount of talent, to say nothing of any addition, a literature might be formed, distinctively and strikingly Australian; and as for material; whence the material of American Literature? In the woods, and the prairies, on the rivers, and the lakes. Among the red Indians and snowy mountains, ay, and in the city too, in the drawing room, in the counting house, in the cottage, and in the hall! If anything be wanted here, it is the men and not the matter, nor do I believe that even *they* are absent, but that if Australians as a nation, would cherish

and be proud of literature as of national and not of European character and interest—a Fenimore Cooper, a Washington Irving, a Channing, a Franklin, and a Willis, would soon spring up in our midst to spread a halo over Australia, by seizing each in his own manner on the material presented in the town, in the bush, among sheep stations, homesteads, squatters, blackfellows, kangaroos or parrots; among seamen or landmen, nativeborn or emigrant, military, naval, or civilian!’<sup>6</sup>

While both these critics see Australian Literature as distinct from and in opposition to English or European literature, this view was not widely shared by Australian writers or readers of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the journal which published the article just quoted from, the *Colonial Literary Journal*, was a close copy of *Chambers’ Edinburgh Miscellany*, and this century was to produce dozens of colonial clones of the *Illustrated London News*, *Punch*, and other English magazines. Writing in the *Australasian* on 27 February 1869, the poet Henry Kendall protested against the call for a separate Australian literature:

We are not desirous to divide ourselves from all the attainments, all the rich results, of the literature of our common English tongue ... So far as literature can grow amongst us, so far as it can reflect local conditions, and give literary form to the altered natural, and social circumstances of our Australian life, so far let it stand as a useful and valuable part of English literature; but let us not fence ourselves up in a petty sphere, narrow our attention to it as our world, and forget the universe from which we shall have cut ourselves off.

Kendall’s opinion is similar to that found in Brennan’s rejection of ‘the hostile frontiers of nationality and language’ and would, I imagine, be one shared by most writers from what we now call post-colonial societies. In his essay ‘The Argentine Writer and Tradition’, for example, Jorge Borges asked ‘What is our Argentine tradition? I believe we can answer this question easily and that there is no problem here. I believe our tradition is all of Western culture, and I do believe we have a right to this tradition, greater than that which the inhabitants of one or another Western nation might have ... we can handle all European themes, handle them without superstition, with an irreverence which can have, and already does have, fortunate consequences’. Elsewhere in this piece—originally given as a lecture



in the 1950s—Borges attacks the equation of ‘local colour’ with nationality in terms which strongly recall Brennan’s 1902 essay. I might add in a parenthesis that the most enjoyable course I have ever taught here was one which studied Australian short story writers in a world context—including collections by Chekhov and Borges as well as stories by English, American and New Zealand writers. In putting that course together, perhaps I subconsciously recalled a passage in Professor Kramer’s inaugural lecture. Arguing that the context of Australian literature included not only Australian history and art and English Literature, but also literature as a whole, she noted:

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.

That, of course, is very much the problem, especially at a time of diminishing resources and diminishing courses. While writers and readers can still be citizens of the world, critics and university teachers are compelled to go about erecting those very fences Kendall complained of. Courses have to be constructed, lectures, articles, and reviews written—the textual world has to be divided up somehow. However much we may deplore the simplifications of the binary, there is no escaping the fact that some authors go in and others go out. In the past, these decisions tended to be made according to what was then seen as the canon: based on an author’s antiquity, reputation, perceived literary value, perceived moral value, etc, etc. As the canon has been progressively deconstructed—not to say exploded—other ways of dividing up texts have been resorted to: by gender or by genre, by period or content, by nationality and/or race of the authors. However one does it, one is constructing a desirable category and selecting on the basis of it: Australian/non-Australian; women/non-women. In erecting a fence to protect and foster one category, one is inevitably constructing all others as others and so excluding them.

It has been interesting to see the old debate over special pleading, and categorisation of writers as Australian or non-Australian, resurfacing recently in a slightly different form in Robert Dessaix's essay in the *Australian Book Review* for February/March 1991, 'Nice Work If You Can Get It'. He sees the categorising of some Australian writing as multicultural as operating more in the interest of certain critics and academics than of the writers themselves. Like Kendall, Dessaix argues that Australian writers are writers and that the multicultural fence—designed to protect and promote—ends up merely producing a ghetto. The thorniness of the multicultural question is well illustrated by the differing labels which have been applied to writers seen as belonging to this group from the 1950s onwards—New Australians, migrants, ethnics, non-Anglo-Celts, NESBs. I was myself quite fond of the term non-Anglo-Celt, largely because in 1983 I invented an acronymic definition of what had been till then the dominant tradition in Australian literature—this was the WACM—white, Anglo-Celtic, male. I had a vain hope that it might become part of the Australian language—along with A. A. Phillips' 'cultural cringe' and Donald Horne's 'lucky country'—but this was not to be. In London last year I was attacked after a seminar for using this term—the attacker argued that to call anyone a 'non-something' was an insult. Perhaps his real objection was one made more recently by Australian Celts who have refused to be associated even at this linguistic level with the English. So both of the terms 'Anglo-Celtic' and 'Non-Anglo-Celtic' are now prohibited as politically incorrect.

The problems are not, of course, with the terms themselves, but the values that become attached to them. We have a bad habit of accepting our own—or our forebears—man-made constructions as natural and inevitable. A recent television documentary on perceptions of Australianness illustrated this well. Young people of Asian and Southern European ethnicity were asked to describe the typical Australian. All replied 'blonde and blue eyed'. 'But what nationality are you?' asked the interviewer. 'Australian', they all responded. Something the reverse happened to me while in hospital earlier this year when one of the cleaners, clearly from a non-English speaking background, asked me where I was born. 'Here, in Sydney, I'm an Australian', I replied. 'And your parents?' she asked. 'They were

also born in Australia', I said. I could have added that all my grandparents and, indeed, most of my great-grandparents, had been born in Australia, but even that may not have convinced her. 'No, you don't seem like an Australian,' she said, shaking her head. 'You are a happy person, and Australians are all ... ', at which point she pulled a very gloomy face.

This incident happened to coincide with my own observation that, out of a truly multicultural group of nurses who looked after me during this period, the best by far were those who were not Australian born and trained. The latter belonged uniformly to the loud-footed, loud-voiced, rough-handed, she'll be right brigade. Both observations led me to reflect again on our national character and to conclude that, if 'old' Australians are such a grumpy, complaining, ill-considerate lot, thank God for multiculturalism.

On that same television programme I mentioned earlier, an academic from Wollongong University's multicultural centre constructed an interesting diagram of Australia's changing population profile in the 200 years since 1788. In the first fifty years, to 1838, the majority of the population was Aboriginal; in the next fifty years British-born; in the next fifty, Australian born. In the final fifty years the majority of the population was again born outside Australia.

In this last period, 1938–1988, we have seen an increasing preoccupation with questions of Australian identity and the construction of it in terms which were only ever true, if true at all, for the previous period, 1888–1938. This period has also seen the establishment of courses in, and centres of, Australian literature and Australian studies, not only in this University, but throughout the world. This period ended with the premature celebration of the bicentenary of Australia—something which will not, of course, actually occur until the year 2101. None of us, I expect, will be still around to see it, though we shall all, I hope, be celebrating the century of Australia in 2001 and the sesquicentury of this University the following year. Some of us may even still be here for the centenary of the English Department, in 2021.

By then, another half-century will almost have passed since 1988, and conceptions of what is literature, what is Australian, will have changed yet again, in their terminology if nothing else. I am, as you may have noticed, a believer in recycling, so I don't imagine

the issues will really have changed all that much. It will still come down to deciding which texts get taught and which don't, to the battle between keeping up with the new and preserving or rediscovering the old, to balancing the desire to foster the local while remaining aware of the international. There have been and there are, as I have tried to show, a range of answers to 'why Australian literature?' and 'what Australian literature?' They, or questions like them, will keep being asked, as long as we have universities, or, at least, universities with strong Faculties of Arts, and a living rather than a dead culture.

#### Notes

1. An inaugural lecture delivered on 20 April 1964 and published by Angus and Robertson in 1964.
2. This lecture is reprinted in A. R. Chisholm & J. J. Quinn, eds, *The Prose of Christopher Brennan*, Sydney, 1962, pp. 220–27.
3. Published in *Arts* 6 (1969): 18–29.
4. 'Australian Literature and the University', *Meanjin* 13 (1954): 165–69.
5. *Sydney Gazette*, 1 November 1826, quoted in Elizabeth Webby, 'Parents rather than Critics: Some Early Reviews of Australian Literature', in Leon Cantrell, ed., *Bards, Bohemians, and Bookmen*, Brisbane, 1976, pp. 19–38.
6. *Colonial Literary Journal*, 27 February 1845, quoted in Elizabeth Webby, 'Before the *Bulletin*: Nineteenth Century Literary Journalism', in Bruce Bennett, ed., *Cross Currents: Magazines and Newspapers in Australian Literature*, Perth, 1981, pp. 3–34.
7. 'Short Fiction in the Eighties: White Anglo-Celtic Male No More?', *Meanjin* 42 (1983): 34–41.