

THE 1998 DOROTHY GREEN  
MEMORIAL LECTURE

## Australian Literature in the Marketplace

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I'd like to begin by thanking the organisers of this conference for inviting me to deliver the 1998 Dorothy Green Memorial Lecture. After twenty years, I am finally getting an hour to myself at an ASAL conference! For those who weren't at the first conference, held at Monash University in May 1978, I should explain that on that occasion most speakers were given an hour to themselves, but because, I assume, there was one too many papers for the time allowed, Veronica Brady and I had to share an hour. I say, I assume, because the alternative explanation would be that the organisers did not want to give two hours to discussions of representations of Aboriginals in early Australian literature. Anyone now reading the conference program would think, as people did at the time, that we were giving a joint paper. In fact, our papers had been written quite independently; we met each other for the first time at that conference. Veronica focussed on the poems of Charles Harpur and I, drawing on my Ph.D material, on poems and stories published in newspapers and magazines. Also giving papers on that Tuesday were Ann-Mari Jordens and Dorothy Green. Dorothy rather tartly asked why all the women speakers had been put on the same day – was it so that the men could go off and do better things? Not at all, was the horrified response – the women had all chosen to speak on nineteenth-century topics, that's why they were together. For the record, eleven men also gave papers and the conference ran, like this year's, for just over four days.

The program for ASAL 98, however, features some 46 paper-givers, not counting those speaking on the panels, and more than three-quarters of them are women. This growth in both the number of paper-givers, and in papers by women in particular, may well be seen as something to celebrate, indicating the progress made in the study of Australian literature over the past twenty years. It's notable, too, that papers on writing by and about Australia's indigenous peoples are no longer marginalised (though nineteenth-century Australian literature in fact gets less space on the program than in 1978). This lecture will not, however, be about changes in the study of Australian literature as reflected in the changing programs of ASAL conferences over the years, tempting as that topic is.

Instead, I want to try to offer some reflections on the impact of other recent changes, in the economic and political scenes especially, on Australian literature

in both of the ways in which it can be defined: as the literary productions of and about Australia and Australians; and as the university discipline, the sub-branch of English, which studies these literary productions. How 'Australian literature', in both senses, is faring at a time of increased globalisation, competition and commodification within the so-called 'cultural industries' and, most specifically for our purposes, in publishing and the universities, is, I assume, of concern to all who belong to an association dedicated to the study of Australian literature. It is certainly of concern to me as someone who professes Australian literature and as someone who currently edits the oldest literary journal in Australia.

This lecture began as a reconsideration of some of Dorothy Green's own work, and has subsequently been influenced by a reading of the 3 volume report prepared by the Academy of the Humanities, *Knowing Ourselves and Others: The Humanities in Australia into the 21st Century* (1998). Among various other influences are the election results in Queensland in June 1998. In discussing some of the challenges that currently face us as writers, readers and critics of Australian literature, I am, like one of my favourite authors, Chekhov, more interested in presenting problems than in offering solutions. This may leave you feeling somewhat frustrated as certainly happened to many in a large audience at Sydney University recently, gathered to hear the American critic and literary historian Stephen Greenblatt lecture on 'Literary History, Identity Politics and Racial Memory'. Part of the frustration came from the fact that, in speaking on a topic of great and immediate concern to his audience, he made no attempt to relate his comments to Australian material.

Initially, when thinking about what I would say to you today, it seemed a good idea to go back to Dorothy Green's own words. I have a strong memory of her at an ASAL conference complaining, with some justification, that paper-givers were ignoring the history of their own discipline, in failing to read earlier criticism of the texts they were discussing.

Accordingly, I reread Dorothy Green's final publication, *Writer, Reader, Critic*, a collection of lectures and talks given in her later years, which appeared in 1991 just before her death. Its title is that of a series of three lectures delivered at James Cook University in 1985 and originally published as *The Writer, the Reader and the Critic in a Monoculture*. What particularly caught my eye on this occasion were the three quotations with which she closed her final lecture: 'on a frivolous note with a message of high seriousness.' I was especially struck by the passage from Emerson which Green chose as her final message to the reader:

The three practical rules, then, which I have to offer are

1. Never read any book that is not a year old.
2. Never read any but famed books. [Emerson lived before books were promoted like soap]
3. Never read any but what you like. (Green 152)

With a similar mixture of frivolousness and seriousness, I began to wonder how practical Emerson's rules would be today, in Australia, near the end of the twentieth

eth century. 'Never read any book that is not a year old.' If Australian readers were to follow this advice most local publishing, bookselling and reviewing would grind to a halt. Indeed, the way we are going, it will soon be impossible to buy many books that are more than a year old. Those of us who have been teaching Australian literature for several decades are beginning to experience a back to the sixties and seventies feeling with courses having continually to be rearranged as set books go out of print. The old joke about the Australian literary canon being whatever was in print is again current. Gerry Wilkes, in the Winter 1998 *Southerly*, responds to last year's *CanonOZities* issue somewhat in these terms, when outlining why he chose to teach certain texts when he became the first Professor of Australian Literature in 1963.

As Dorothy Green noted, Emerson's second rule – 'Never read any but famed books' – depends on an agreed notion of fame, which no longer holds in today's world. Now, when we all seem to be guaranteed our five minutes of fame (mine arrived last year with a brief appearance – certainly no more than five minutes – in an episode of the ABC TV series *UNI*), now, fame is equated with media exposure rather than the gradually accumulating approbation of men of taste which Emerson would have had in mind. Writers are now encouraged to view themselves as well as their books as products that can be sold like soap, with even the most famous (in Emerson's sense of the term) expected, and usually delighted, to appear on TV chat shows and talk-back radio as well as perform at the burgeoning number of writers' festivals, readings and other literary events. So, today, we might want, cynically, to change Emerson's rule to 'Never read anything but books by the famous'. The increased emphasis on marketing can have serious consequences for those writers whose publishers cannot afford the costs involved or who, for various reasons, lack the necessary glamour, verbal skills and confidence.

Emerson's third rule – 'Never read any but what you like' – might, initially, seem the one that still remains current, but how practical is it at a time when concepts like literary taste and value have been seriously questioned? Greenblatt claimed that, despite all the smoke and fire of recent American culture wars, the English curriculum there had not changed markedly from his own time as a student. He felt, however, that major changes were inevitable because the next generation of students was growing up in a culture where the spaces previously filled by the written word were increasingly being taken over by the visual and the aural. He also felt that, if left to themselves, graduate students, would only choose to study works 'written last night', and deplored the increasing tendency to assume that women students would naturally prefer to write on women writers, Afro-Americans on Afro-Americans and so forth. Here it seems that Emerson's rule transforms into 'Never read any but what is like you'. But, whatever may be the case in America, it is certainly not true that graduate students in Australia are concentrating mainly, let alone solely, on Australian literature. Nor is this true of undergraduate students.

After many years of trying we have finally reformed the first year English course at Sydney University to include 25% Australian content in the core. Students now also have a choice between three courses in second semester – but only about 12%

of them take the option that includes any significant Australian content.

The Academy report on the state of the Humanities in Australia which I mentioned earlier struck me by and large as a remarkably complacent document. Long on pats on the back about the wonderful achievements of those working in the humanities, with a few alarms over the current threats to the sector, but not much in the way of strategies about how these would be met. Bob White of the University of Western Australia, for example, in surveying 'The State of English Studies in the 1990s', sees the growth of Australian literary studies since the 1970s as 'an almost Cinderella-like success story':

Every department of English in Australia includes courses and researches the area. It provides a burgeoning postgraduate body, there are centres of Australian literature dotted around the world, and in an interesting reversal of the 'cultural cringe' Oxford and Cambridge University Presses, like Penguin, established large and autonomous branches in this country (although, admittedly some have moved out as readily as they have moved in) ... (White 102)

White's final aside is, I think, worth more attention than he, by putting it in parenthesis, allows. The crisis in the scholarly publishing of Australian history is addressed more tellingly elsewhere in the Academy's report by Janet McCalman. What White's aside hints at, however, is now becoming increasingly obvious: Cinderella's coach is rapidly turning back into a pumpkin. As I have already indicated, the situation with respect to the Australian literary back list is reverting to that which prevailed in the 1970s. Once again, too, few mainstream presses are publishing poetry or literary or critical studies. The golden age of Australian publishing and the promotion of Australian literature, primed by the 1972 Whitlam victory and kept going through the 1980s by the financial largesse associated with the celebration of the 1988 Bicentenary of Australia, is well and truly over.

White notes a danger that 'the very success of Australian Studies is becoming something of a liability, for with respectability and maturity comes the accusation of a new conservatism from the exponents of a different model of regionalism' (White 103). He is pointing to the challenge of postcolonial literary studies, though it seems to me that Cultural Studies is now much more firmly established as the oppositional other of English literary studies, a position that Australian literary studies held in the 1970s and earlier. It is a shock to find one's identity as an inhabitant of the margin suddenly transformed into that of a guardian of the powerful centre, especially if one still feels very far from central. This happened to me at a conference on multicultural literature in the early eighties. I was chairing the final session on a very hot day; Sneja Gunew was one of the speakers and asked to go last. It became clear why when she descended from the podium to turn around and attack the rest of us - 'What are all you Anglos doing sitting up there and speaking on a panel on multicultural writing?' she asked. This was my first lesson in the changing nature of Australian identity politics, bringing with it a realisation

that I, as a teacher of Australian literature, was now seen as one of the gatekeepers, someone intent on denying entry to writers from, say, Italian and Greek backgrounds, in much the same way as Australian writers had earlier been excluded from the hallowed greens of English literature.

Of course, the twenty or so years since the 1970s have seen great changes in the discipline of English studies worldwide, and the impact of these changes on English teaching in Australia has been far greater than those resulting from the admission of some Australian material into the curriculum. These changes in themselves reflected broader changes in social and cultural attitudes, flowing from the student, feminist and black power movements of the sixties, plus the slightly later struggles for gay liberation. Everywhere, it seemed, the former supremacy of the white, heterosexual, Anglo, male was under challenge. Reviewing recent Australian short story collections in a special multicultural issue of *Meanjin* in 1983 (side by side, I saw, when going back to check the date, with Sneja Gunew), I myself invented the term WACM – WHITE, ANGLO-CELTIC MALE – to describe the former dominant influence in Australian story writing. (I had a secret hope that it might become part of the language, like Donald Horne's 'the lucky country', but alas no, even though I have kept referring to it in every public lecture I've given over the years.)

My review questioned whether the 1980s would mark the end of the domination of Australian short fiction by WACM writers. As things turned out they did, but that did not of course mean the end of WACM power, either in Australia or elsewhere. English courses and publishers' lists may have changed as a result of the ferments of the seventies but the real game lay elsewhere. As the 'greed is good' decade of the eighties gave way to the belt-tightening and down-sizing of the nineties, the WACMs reasserted their control via the doctrine of economic rationalism at the political level, combined with, indeed largely produced by, ever-increasing globalisation on the world economic scene. Though the stories we chose to tell about ourselves may have become more varied, though some of the formerly subjected may now have been able to assert their own subjectivity, those who perhaps most needed to listen were tied firmly to their corporate masts, their ears blocked with muzak.

There is a certain irony in the fact that these last decades, marked theoretically for those of us in literary studies by the influence of such European writers as Barthes, Foucault, Irigaray and Kristeva, have seen an increasing dominance of English as the universal language of communication, science and commerce, as part of the increasing globalisation of world trade. Likewise, as others have noted, a period which celebrated the death of the author, has seen exponential growth in personal appearances by authors and in writing about them. As a part of this, the novel's dominance as a literary genre – in publishers' lists, in the curriculum, in the topics being researched by academics and graduate students – is increasingly being challenged by a growing interest in autobiography, biography, and life writing. And although, theoretically, we now know that there is no such thing as the unified human subject, there has been a growing emphasis at the political level on individual agency, as opposed to that of the state or the community, as part of the doctrine of economic rationalism.

While ideas of nationalism have certainly not gone away, the old ideal of the nation state, which looked after all of its citizens, and took pride in their educational and cultural, as well as sporting achievements, has been seriously eroded. So has the old ideal of Australia as the land of freedom: tolerant, democratic, easy-going, the one place on earth untainted by major sectarian or racial conflicts. While we have become well aware of some of the furphies inhabiting that Australian legend, I must confess that up to a few years ago I was still proudly looking towards 2000, when we could display to the world a country where reconciliation had finally been achieved with the descendants of the original owners, and where people from all the races and nations of the earth were able to live together in harmony and mutual respect.

The recent shattering of my fantasy of a twenty-first century Australian identity does, I hope, allow me to sympathise with those, especially those from rural Australia, who are also trying to come to terms with the many recent challenges to their own understanding of what it means to be an Australian. As anyone who has studied Australian literary history knows, there was an increasing emphasis throughout the nineteenth century on the need for a distinctive Australian literature, one in the words of one commentator, 'smacking racy of the soil' (qtd in Webby 31). Distinctiveness was thus seen to lie in the peculiarities of the Australian landscape, in life in the bush rather than the cities – pace that well-known passage from *Such is Life*: so that the 'true Australian' came to be defined as the bushman, even though, by the 1890s at the latest, the bulk of Australia's population lived in the cities.

For a whole range of reasons, most of them international as much as national, the Australian legend, held sway for much of the twentieth century, influencing those who resisted it as much as its proponents. The latter, of course, included those like Miles Franklin, Vance Palmer and the many other Australian writers who pushed for greater recognition and support for Australian literature. Their efforts bore fruit during and immediately after the Second World War, a time of great national unity, in the establishment of bodies like the Commonwealth Literary Fund, later to become the Literature Board of the Australia Council, and the Australian Society of Authors, and in the setting up of the Chair of Australian Literature at Sydney University.

But these same post-war years also saw the beginnings of the mass migrations, initially of those displaced by the war, which were to begin the challenge to old concepts of the Australian identity. By the 1990s, helped by changes resulting from the various liberation movements of the sixties and seventies I mentioned earlier, and further impelled by the new theoretical concepts of postmodernism, poststructuralism and postcolonialism, the bushman had fallen from national ideal to bottom of the heap. Unfortunately for those actually living in the bush, this decline in their representational status was mirrored by a more immediately disastrous one in their actual life-styles.

Of course, life had never been easy for the bushman or the farmer – that was at the heart of the Legend. But there had been the comfort of knowing that what one was doing was vital to the cultural imaginary of the nation as well as to its material

prosperity. Not that many living in the bush may have actually thought like that but I imagine it was still a shock to see themselves – or their ancestors transformed from heroes into villains, from pioneers into invaders. Perhaps worse, to find that their story was no longer central to the story of the nation, since this story was no longer centred in the bush but in the suburbs or the city, and often revolved around old ways being challenged by the new. Think of the difference between some of the most popular films of the seventies and of the nineties: *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *My Brilliant Career* on the one hand, *Strictly Ballroom* and *Muriel's Wedding* on the other.

Rural Australians, then, are experiencing the reverse shock to the one I encountered in the eighties – finding themselves on the margins rather than at the centre, feeling like displaced persons in what they thought was their own land. I saw something a little similar a couple of years ago when my mother, in her late seventies and having lived on a farm in the bush for almost fifty years, attended our son's graduation at the University of New South Wales. It was a Commerce Faculty affair so a large majority of the graduates, and the audience, were Asian. For the first time in her life, my mother, as a white Australian, was in the minority at a large social gathering in her own country, and it was a great shock to her.

The vast bulk of the people who are supporting Pauline Hanson have, I imagine, been suffering from a similar state of shock. Recast as villains rather than heroes in the national story, they have responded by casting themselves as victims. In voting out the Keating government in 1996, they presumably felt they were assuring, with the return of a Coalition government, their own return to a position of centrality. Instead, they perceive that things have continued to get worse for them rather than better, and so they are flocking to a party which promises to turn the clock back to a time when the bush was still seen as central to the nation, the prosperous fifties (something John Howard seemed to promise, but failed to deliver).

Of course, Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party will not be able to do this either but its racist stance has already done considerable damage to Australia's social, political and economic life and this damage will continue for at least the next few years. What are the specific consequences for Australian literature? Will the challenges to concepts of a national literature, already coming from postcolonialism, be exacerbated by the bad odour the Hansonites will give to anything to do with nationalism? Will this make students even less interested in things Australian than they currently are? What about One Nation's policy on abolishing all grants to the arts? What effect will this have on government policies at a time when economic rationalism is already leading to severe cuts in support for cultural bodies and universities? And at a time when globalisation is having a strong impact on the local publishing industry?

Many of the current difficulties seem to flow from a decline in earlier beliefs in cross-subsidisation in favour of a policy of everyone having to stand on their own two feet and everything having to make a profit. So publishers are no longer prepared, as Angus and Robertson was in the fifties, to subsidise Australian poetry from the sale of its cookery books. Universities are no longer prepared, as they were in the fifties, to keep their Arts faculties going out of the profits of professional

faculties like Law and Medicine. Governments are no longer prepared to cross-subsidise those who live in the bush out of the taxes of those who live in the city or, rather, this is one of the consequences of the selling off of government enterprises to the highest commercial bidder.

Looking deeper, it can be argued that the decline in the belief in cross-subsidisation relates to a decline in the belief in certain formerly widely-held values. Why should those who want to buy cookery books help to subsidise those who read poetry? Why do we need courses in Greek or Latin, or even in Australian Literature? Why should those of us who live in the cities help to pay for those who choose to live in the country? In the past, there was general agreement that a poem had higher literary value than a recipe for sponge cake (or even pavlova); that a country needed specialists in the classics and in its national literature as well as dentists and orthopaedic surgeons; that those who lived in the bush were the backbone of the nation and so needed to be supported.

In a recent debate on Arts funding, it was argued that the cultural industries had left themselves open to attacks of the One Nation sort by getting into bed with the economic rationalists in constructing themselves as industries, and arguing for the economic rather than the intrinsic value of what they were doing. After the theoretical and other challenges of the past two or three decades, it is also very difficult for those of us who teach and study Australian literature to argue for the intrinsic value of what we do. If we try to stress its national value, then we come up against the problem of how to constitute the national, the 'Australian', at a time when this is a site of great contestation. If, on the other hand, we stress the 'literature' then we not only have to try to argue for the value of literary as against other kinds of cultural products, but are still faced with the need to argue for the local as against other sorts of literature.

For me, the chief value of literature is that it gives us a perspective on both our current problems and our current achievements. It makes us aware that, whatever our differences, we share some basics: we are all born, we all die; we have certain similar needs and desires; we are all capable of generosity and of betrayal. Despite the growing emphasis on individualism as reflected in the title of the latest *Meanjin* – we are not alone: others have gone before and experienced some of the same pains, the same pleasures. In the words of Sir Thomas Browne, as used by Henry Handel Richardson as the epigraph to the first volume of *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*: 'Every man is not only himself; ... men are lived over again; the world is now as it was in ages past' (Richardson). And, in the words of Dorothy Green: 'literature ... is humanity thinking aloud – communicating its experience of all that is, holding a great continuous discussion throughout the ages and across the world' (16).

If we wish to fully participate in this discussion, we can't just confine ourselves to books by people whom we like or who are like us. It is necessary to read books by people from other cultures and from other centuries. It is necessary to honour the achievements of the past as well as those of the present. It is necessary to value difference as well as similarity.

If all the theorising of the past few decades has taught us anything, it has taught

us to question the grand narratives, including the narrative of progress, and to beware of binary thinking. But these two intellectual habits are so ingrained in, at least the Western tradition, that they are almost impossible to escape. We are continually encouraged, no less by the make-it-new emphasis in arts funding than by the scientific bias of university research culture, to reject the past, to believe it has nothing to offer us – to Other it.

Rural Australia was central to stories of Australia's past; it was made central by those – like Miles Franklin and Vance Palmer – who also helped make possible our own discipline of Australian literary studies. What responsibility, then, do we have to those who have found, to their dismay, that the story has changed and that they are no longer central to it? Can we just easily dismiss them as our Others, as deluded, ill-educated, behind the times?

No doubt many of you were horrified, as I was, to hear reports of a New South Wales National Party meeting held after the Queensland election at which members were complaining that Aboriginal kids were spending up big at the school tuckshop while their own grandchildren went without. A few days ago, however, I was reminded of a passage I had included in my anthology *Colonial Voices* (1989). It was written in 1793 by the convict artist Thomas Watling:

Many of these savages are allowed, what is termed, a freeman's ratio of provision for their idleness. They are bedecked at times, with dress which they make away with the first opportunity, preferring the originality of naked nature; and they are treated with the most singular tenderness. This you will suppose not more than laudable; but is there one spark of charity exhibited to poor wretches, who are at least denominated christians? No, they are frequently denied the common necessities of life! wrought to death under the oppressive heat of a burning sun; or barbarously afflicted with often little merited arbitrary punishment . . . (Watling 14)

Those who are down will always try to find someone else to place on the negative side of the binary seesaw. We cannot merely condemn the supporters of Pauline Hanson; we need to understand why they are supporting her and try to offer them a better alternative reading of their situation. In order to do this, we need to continue to teach and research across the whole range of Australian literature. We must not let our courses or our own work be guided totally by the latest theoretical fashions or by the need to attract the greatest number of students. And when we teach earlier literature – earlier than that written yesterday, that is – we need to be careful not just to teach it in a negative way. Certainly there are problems with Prichard's representation of Aboriginals in *Coomardoo*, but there are positive things to say about that book as well, otherwise why bother to teach it?

After I gave my twenty-minute paper on 'The Aboriginal in Early Australian Literature' back in 1978, I was advised that I was lucky there were no Aboriginals in the audience. They, I was told, would have given me a hard time for daring to

discuss the work of white writers who had taken on Aboriginal personas in order to condemn whites for killing Aboriginals and stealing their land. As Henry Reynolds has recently shown in *This Whispering in Our Hearts* (1998), many other colonists joined in this condemnation, although the majority, like Thomas Watling, did not. Let us hope that, despite recent events, the balance is now firmly tilted the other way. Let us also hope that it will still be possible to study Australian literature – whatever both of these terms may then mean – in the year 2018.

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