

***The Cambridge History of Australian Literature*. Ed. Peter Pierce.**

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 622pp.

ISBN-13: 9780521881654 (hbk)

AUS\$140

www.cambridge.org/aus/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=9780521881654

The last thirty years have seen five major literary histories of Australia: Leonie Kramer, ed. *The Oxford History of Australian Literature* (1981), Laurie Hergenhan, ed. *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia* (1988), Bruce Bennett and Jennifer Strauss, eds. *The Oxford Literary History of Australia* (1998), Elizabeth Webby, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature* (2000) and most recently, Peter Pierce, ed. *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature* (2009). We can note in passing just how invested OUP and CUP have been in staking out an authoritative position on Australian literary writing over the years. The most interesting and useful of these local literary histories, however, was produced by a multinational commercial publisher, not a university press. *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia* (PNLHA) answered the limited range of Kramer's earlier volume with a remarkable thirty-four chapters, immediately dispersing any received sense of the Australian literary canon. It began, in a jumbled first section, with two short essays on Aboriginal literature and an essay on Australian humour: inconceivable in Kramer's volume. It also ran the risk of losing focus, of being all over the place for most of the time. Even so, it relished its 'newness' and covered a considerable amount of ground. In an early chapter in the PNLHA titled 'Forms of Australian Literary History', Pierce – who returned to the literary history scene twenty years later as editor of the recent *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature* (CHAL) – offered a sour reprimand to previous assessments of Australian literary writing for being far too old-fashioned. 'In the literary history of Australia', he wrote, 'proclaimed "new directions" have been discouragingly lacking in novelty....The literary histories of Australia that invent different issues of debate, that abandon residual insecurities concerning the value of local materials...remain to be written' (88). It might seem here as if Pierce lacked faith even in the 'newness' of the new literary history to which he was contributing. But the call for literary histories in Australia to yield some 'novelty' has not worked in their favour. If anything, the range of material covered in the recent CUP Australian literary history under Pierce's editorship has significantly contracted, and I shall detail some examples of this below. The paradigms have also barely changed since the PNLHA; in many respects they have ossified. Many of the same contributors can be found in the PNLHA, *The Oxford Literary History of Australia* (OLHA), *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature* (CCAL), and Pierce's CHAL. CHAL even has a chapter from one of the contributors to Kramer's 1981 literary history. There is very little 'novelty' in CHAL's table of contents, with twenty-four chronologically-arranged chapters from Australian literary academics who in many cases have been around for a very long time (and in a few cases have had almost no association with Australian literary studies at all). The average age of CHAL's contributors is probably around sixty-five. A significant number of these contributors are of Pierce's generation and have long since retired from academic life. I say this not as a criticism of longevity, of course: but a case could certainly be made that the overwhelming seniority of CHAL's contributors places severe limits on its capacity to do something new with its subject matter. It is in fact a stifflingly boring Australian literary history.

Even the dour crimson cover of CHAL, designed to signify literary authority, isn't new: ten years earlier the cover of OLHA was in exactly the same colour. CHAL's cover reproduces

Louis Kahan's heavy-handed portrait of Patrick White, set deep into its crimson frame and shoring up its aura of literary authority by asserting (despite what might happen inside its pages) its commitment to a familiar, if austere, Australian literary canon. The OLHA, on the other hand, spread a reproduction of Agnes Goodsir's 1915 painting, *Girl on Couch*, right across its front cover: a much less well-known portrait of an unnamed girl reading. The feminine orientation of OLHA's cover was partly reflected by its content, with 7 women contributors out of 17 and an emphasis on women's writing and on feminism as a way of frameworking and understanding Australian literary production. The term 'feminism' takes up significant space in the index; there is even an entry on 'radical feminism' in the OLHA. By the time we get to Pierce's CHAL, however, feminism has shrunk to just a single index entry and the word 'radical' is nowhere to be seen. There are just 6 women contributors out of 26 in CHAL. This is a defiantly white, male literary history, in spite of everything that has happened to shape the Australian literary field in recent years. There are no indigenous contributors and no Asian-Australian, or even Euro-Australian, contributors. Of course, CHAL isn't the only Australian literary history to exclude contributors from non Anglo-Australian backgrounds: this is an all-too-familiar problem with these kinds of projects which the editors and publishers seem only too happy not to address. The 1998 OLHA was framed by two chapters from Adam Shoemaker on indigenous literatures (although at the time Shoemaker used the more problematic term 'Black Australian'). We can certainly wonder about Shoemaker's monopoly of the indigenous field in this earlier volume: how could the editors have let this happen? CHAL, on the other hand, devotes only one chapter to indigenous writing, this time by Penny van Toorn. Every subsequent (usually brief) reference to indigenous writing in CHAL is folded into broader, shapeless discussions of other things; so that by the time we get to Susan Lever's chapter on modern Australian fiction, Kim Scott and Alexis Wright are cast adrift among a sea of Anglo-Australian writers. In the same way, a passing, vague nod to the 'work of Asian immigrants' (512) is overshadowed by Lever's focus on those Anglo-Australian writers (Jose, Koch, D'Alpuget etc) who have in turn gone to Asia for their subject-matter. A chapter elsewhere in CHAL on 'Representations of Asia', by Robin Gerster, does the same sort of thing: spending almost all of its time on Anglo-Australian writers who have engaged with Asian themes and adding a brief list of Asian-Australian writers at the end only as a kind of after-thought. Neither Gerster nor Lever seem to know how to approach or understand this kind of writing. But Gerster's conclusion – that there may come a time 'when the subject of "Australians-in-Asia" will be redundant, a matter of curiosity' (322) – is worth noting, if only for the way it finally identifies his chapter as an anachronism in the field of progressive literary analysis.

Lever's chapter also gives us an insight into what has happened to feminism in CHAL. In fact, she had also contributed a chapter on modern Australian fiction to the OLHA ten years earlier. Far from charting 'new directions' in CHAL, both chapters turn out to be strikingly similar, each, for example, beginning with a discussion of Patrick White and his legacy ('Patrick White and His Influence' in OLHA; 'White's Influence' in CHAL). Both chapters have sections devoted to the 1970s and the 1980s (a mere couple of pages in each case) but not the 1990s, inexplicably; and the CHAL chapter barely ventures into the new millennium. Her OLHA chapter never mentioned important events like the Helen Demidenko affair – which generated a huge amount of public commentary and position-taking in the literary field – leaving it up to other contributors like Bruce Bennett and Graeme Turner to look into the matter. In her CHAL chapter, it is dismissed merely as 'some scandal' (516), hardly worth remarking on. In the OLHA chapter, indigenous writing and 'multicultural' writing were conflated together under the neutralising title, 'Other Voices'. In the CHAL chapter,

'multicultural' writing has quietly dropped away and the subheading under which indigenous writing, and what is obscurely referred to as the 'work of Asian immigrants', now find themselves is the more politically-charged 'Australia and post-colonial power'. But Lever never explains what she means by this title and she certainly never tells us how postcolonialism might be used as a way of understanding the writers she lists. (In fact, 'post-colonial' is of so little interest to CHAL that it never makes the index). There is one striking difference between Lever's two literary history essays, however. Lever's earlier OLHA chapter had devoted a section to 'Women's Writing and Feminism'. But in her CHAL chapter there is no equivalent: the topic and the field simply vanish from the discussion.

What are we to make of the way Australian women's writing and the methodologies for understanding it have been so systematically wiped from the pages of Pierce's CHAL? Is this one of its 'new directions'? One of the worst chapters in CHAL is 'Australia's England, 1880-1950' by Peter Morton, an academic from South Australia who has had little to do with Australian literary studies. This gossipy, shambolic piece of writing follows a much more systematic account of Australian expatriatism abroad by Robert Dixon: so that the same sort of thing seems to have been done twice over in this literary history, which remains obsessed with Anglo-Australian relations at the expense of almost anything else. But whereas Dixon mobilises some key themes to make sense of his writers (the problem of cultural provincialism in a 'world republic of letters', for example), Morton gives us a hotch-potch of opinions and bits and pieces. A final section with the ill-chosen title, 'Weaning Australia from the teats of London' (which begins with the equally ill-chosen comment that, in 1948, 'Patrick White...chose to stop sucking from the teats of London', and then stays with that metaphor for just a little too long), turns out not to be about cultural nationalism at all, ending instead by dissolving its Australian writers into a porridge of other expatriates (Joyce, Lawrence, Stevenson, Conrad) as if this is the natural trajectory of everyone everywhere. As with so many chapters in CHAL, this one appears to have no methodology: it just lists. But more importantly, it is simply unable to understand what it is looking at. Morton's view that late colonial Australian writers had only 'a handful of journals' to publish in (261) couldn't be more wrong. The views of important colonial writers are dismissed as if they are aberrations or as if they are hopelessly naïve. The prolific J.H. Abbott wrote numerous late colonial novels, histories of William Dampier and Ben Hall, the best-selling *Tommy Cornstalk* (1902) and a book about London poverty, *Letters from Queer Street* (1908), among many other things. But Morton flattens him down as a 'journalist' and then reads Abbott's perfectly understandable wish from London to be buried on 'Australian soil' as 'surely the weirdest plea heard in life or literature from an expatriate' (272). This reading is both incomprehensible and pointless. Morton is unable to provide himself with a framework for understanding how colonial Australian literary careers were shaped in London and elsewhere, and this failing is most apparent when he talks about women writers. Louise Mack's *An Australian Girl in London* (1902) was a strategically-written best-seller designed to produce a vibrant set of England/Australia contrasts and reconciliations, with the young narrator homesick for Australian life ('I carry Australia around with me') yet immensely excited about living in London for all its muddle and dirt, and relishing the prospect of immersing herself in all its 'varied nationalities'. But Morton quotes a passage from this light-hearted novel at random in order to dismiss it as 'typified' by 'a sort of horrified complacency' about British life. This habit of pulling passages out of context and then hitting the authors over the head with them skews the entire chapter. Morton returns to Mack soon afterwards, reducing her to a kind of empty-headed flirt who spent her time 'scribbling romantic tales': 'London was good to Louise Mack...She charmed the editor W.T. Stead, who had an eye for a pretty face,

just as she had aroused the lust of A.G. Stephens at home' (274). This offensive little summary of an important literary figure (famous, among other things, for her first-hand account of the Belgian atrocities during the First World War) is about the best colonial women writers get from this chapter. What it means for colonial women writers to gain a literary career in London – to become professional writers – is entirely lost on Morton. Unsurprisingly, Angela Wollacott's important account of this topic, *To Try Her Fortune in London: Australian women, colonialism, and modernity* (2001), is never mentioned: it is as if Pierce's CHAL has never heard of it. The chance to look systematically at colonial women's literary careers in London – what was at stake here, the structures women writers depended on, their professional networks, their achievements, and so on - is therefore completely missed.

At its worst, CHAL degenerates into a series of lists of Australian authors, with no way of making sense of them. The lists themselves are always partial and incomplete, a problem that bedevils literary histories, especially ones with large-scale national ambitions. Many writers simply go missing in CHAL. Colonial writers absent from this literary history include Ethel Castilla, Mabel Forrest, James Skipp Borlase, B.L. Farjeon, Campbell McKellar, and the prolific Roderic Quinn, to name just a few. I couldn't find a single reference to Randolph Bedford, one of the most widely networked late colonial writers in Australia. When writers *are* mentioned, they are often almost completely misrepresented. Bruce Bennett provides the wrong date for Hume Nisbet's *The Haunted Station* (1894) and describes Nisbet's presentation of Australia as 'a remote and exotic land' (172): which conveys quite the wrong impression of this novelist. Moreton writes off Mary Fortune as 'an obscure scribbler of detective fiction' (260), despite the fact that she steadily contributed to the *Australian Journal* for around 50 years. When we get to the modern end of this literary history, writers are especially ill-served. Here is a list of just a few contemporary novelists missing from CHAL: Steven Carroll, Elliot Perlman, Fiona Capp, Gabrielle Carey, Susan Johnson, Eva Sallis (now Hornung), Michael Meehan, Sonya Hartnett (who is never mentioned in Clare Bradford's essay on Children's Literature), James Bradley, Hsu-Ming Teo, Nam Le, Brenda Walker, and a host of others. J.M Coetzee – who emigrated to Australia in 2002 and became an Australian citizen in 2006, writing a series of novels with Australian characters and settings - is never mentioned. A few modern Australian genre novelists are listed in David Carter's chapter and in Richard Nile and Jason Ensor's chapter in CHAL, but the opportunity to look closely at developments in the popular genres in this literary history is not taken. There is no sustained (or even brief) inquiry into the Australian Gothic, adventure fiction (comments here are scattered and piecemeal), crime fiction, romance, SF and fantasy (Sara Douglass is mentioned but her name is mis-spelt in the index) and the family saga. Popular culture more broadly speaking also doesn't do well in CHAL. For Dennis Haskell in a chapter titled 'Scribbling on the Fringes', Australian poetry is something readers could turn to as a way of escaping 'from a world of consumerism, supermodels, pop singers, the worship of the body and other surface distractions' (472).

In a broad-based literary history such as this, literary assessments are almost always brief and fleeting. Very few contributors look at a writer's literary development; often, a single, minor work is mentioned (as it was for J.H. Abbott) and the rest is forgotten. Many assessments in CHAL, however, are often downright unhelpful. Lever's chapter in the earlier OLHA devoted two paragraphs to David Ireland in an attempt to understand this important writer's contribution to Australian literary urban modernism. But her chapter in CHAL reduces him

down to a couple of sentences, dismissing Ireland for offering ‘no political solutions’ (to what?) and offering the bland insight that his novels ‘appear pieced together from observations and wild imaginings’ (508): something one might say about almost any writer. Elsewhere, it can seem as if contributors simply give up on coverage to concentrate instead on a few select examples from the canon. Brian Matthews’ chapter on the relations between history and fiction takes its title, perhaps obscurely, from a speech by Ariel in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (‘I come...to ride / On the curl’d clouds’). This is an odd chapter that frames itself with a discussion of Manning Clark as a ‘literary’ historian. It then begins with a brief mention of a couple of historians’ critiques of Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River*, followed with a long quotation from Grenville defending the literary process that Matthews presents without comment. It looks as if the chapter might venture into the ‘history wars’ and perhaps think carefully about the way Australian literature has indeed shaped and negotiated historical material. But it wanders off instead to talk about Lawson’s short stories, Furphy’s *Such is Life* (‘Perhaps it is the mavericks who best enlist history to their fictional cause’), Herbert’s *Capricornia* and, perhaps surprisingly, White’s *The Tree of Man*. The relationship between literature and history drifts in and out as a topic. Long quotations are provided from each writer, which is good since so little primary material tends to find its way into these literary histories; but which is bad because there is no framework provided in the chapter for making sense of what they say. This brief glimpse into the white male Australian literary canon then returns to Manning Clark to conclude that in ‘both history and fiction, the imagination – the making of story – will always play its part’ (359). No one will argue with this cliché, I’m sure. But it doesn’t mean anything much on its own, and the opportunity to discuss it in relation to a series of key Australian literary and historical moments has again been lost.

Some chapters in CHAL play out their dutiful relationship to the literary canon, but when others let go of it they can seem arbitrary and unstructured. Tanya Dalziell’s ‘No Place for a Book? Fiction in Australia to 1890’ begins with a discussion of John Hillcoat’s recent film, *The Proposition* (2005), seriously displacing its topic even before it begins. But her interest in early relations between history and fiction (a section is subtitled ‘organising writing into fiction and history’) could have been useful reading for Matthews later on. There is always a nagging sense in these literary histories that each contributor is blissfully unaware of what other contributors are actually saying. Dalziell’s chapter is positioned after an earlier chapter by Elizabeth Webby, ‘The Beginnings of Literature in Colonial Australia’ – which covers more than enough ground to suggest that the title of Dalziell’s chapter (‘no place for a book?’) is quite beside the point. Webby’s systematic approach to the early colonial literary field is pretty much the opposite of Dalziell’s approach to the late 19th century, although this is a mixed blessing because Dalziell’s haphazard chapter does have some appeal. But it means, for example, that almost nothing gets said in CHAL about late colonial publishing: a problem even for Webby’s chapter which sets up some of the parameters for what is supposed to follow. The prolific George Robertson is mentioned only in passing as ‘active in the second half of the century’ (but how? and when, exactly?), and his career is reduced down to being ‘primarily a bookseller’ (45). The even more prolific NSW Bookstall is also mentioned only once, briefly, as the ‘innovative’ publisher of two local novels (237) – even though its Australian publishing list was considerable. E.W. Cole is never mentioned at all. There is no sustained account of a colonial publishing infrastructure in CHAL: nothing on the many Colonial Libraries, nothing on Edward Petherick and the Colonial Bookseller’s Agency, very little at all on the colonial magazines and newspapers, and certainly nothing on the important work of literary illustrators, designers and so on (like Norman Lindsay, Hume Nisbet, Phil May and many others). Moreton’s mistaken view that colonial writers had only ‘a handful of

journals' to publish in is more or less borne out by the way CHAL ignores this topic. Only the *Bulletin* and the *Australian Journal* get significant attention; the *Lone Hand* and the *Centennial Magazine* are mentioned only in passing; there is nothing on George Robertson's *Antipodean*, the *Boomerang*, Baldwin Spencer's *Australasian Critic*, Ernest Favenc's *Cosmos Magazine*, and nothing to speak of about the colonial weeklies like the important *Australian Town and Country Journal* or the *Queenslander*. In Bruce Bennett's chapter, Marcus Clarke is a contributor to (but not an editor of) the *Colonial Monthly*, the only time this significant journal is mentioned. In Dalziell's chapter, Clarke is almost completely cut away from the late colonial literary infrastructure, described in passing only through his 'anti-Semitic toned' contributions to the *Australasian* about Melbourne low life.

In the 1998 OLHA, a chapter by Patrick Buckridge had made a point of turning away from individual authors to focus instead on 'political pressures and strategies, administrative structures and processes, group identities and professional associations' (169). In particular, it aimed to trace the institutionalisation of 'Australian literature' as a meaningfully assembled and disseminated body of writing. In Pierce's CHAL, the best chapters continue this kind of work: Ken Stewart's opening account of Australia's early structural negotiations with formative British influences, the chapters by Webby and Dalziell, and the chapters by Robert Dixon and David Carter. What might be surprising about a book entirely written by academics (or retired academics), however, is that there is almost nothing in CHAL on the most influential institutional site for the shaping and dissemination of its field of inquiry: the education sector. Dennis Haskell gives the teaching of poetry in schools and universities a quick airing, but suggests that English departments might 'bear much of the blame for poetry's limited readership' (454): an anti-institutional gesture in a chapter on poetry that ignores the contribution of the poets themselves to this predicament. But CHAL has very little to say about pedagogy, syllabus and curriculum. Carter's chapter at least includes a section on early academic criticism that begins with the introduction of a course in Australian literature at the ANU in 1954 and the establishment of a chair in Australian literature at the University of Sydney in 1962. (Only the University of Sydney makes it into the index, oddly.) His chapter is primarily about literary publishing, however, and (just as some of the coverage in Dixon's chapter is repeated by Morton) it sits awkwardly alongside a later chapter by Richard Nile and Jason Ensor that also takes literary publishing as its theme and even covers some of the exact same topics, such as Mark Davis's view of the contemporary literary 'paradigm' in Australia. They ignore the same topics, too: like the role new media plays in relation to Australian writers and readers. The 'internet' gets only one index entry in CHAL; it also got only one index entry ten years before in OLHA, as if it really is true that the more things change the more they stay the same.

To their credit, Carter and Nile and Ensor work through their topics in a relatively systematic, informed way. Too many of the other chapters in CHAL aren't really about providing sustained narrative histories of particular archives or fields at all. Instead, they simply reflect the dispositions (canonical in some cases, eclectic or downright idiosyncratic in others) of their contributors, floating free of any articulated sense of framework or method. John Kinsella's chapter on modern poetry takes this as a virtue and champions the figure of the 'maverick' (as Brian Matthews had done), positioned *against* institutions and 'communities' rather than working through them. But at least Kinsella has a 'model' for his analysis. Peter Pierce's awkwardly-titled chapter, 'Australia's Australia', is one among a number of contributions in CHAL with neither model nor method. As it meanders along, it includes a

commentary on Herbert's *Capricornia* that seems unaware of Matthews' discussion of the novel elsewhere in the volume. It hovers around the war years, looking at various investments in nationhood and national identity; but it seems to have no way of making sense of anything it touches. It is utterly different to Adrian Caesar's incisive chapter on the Anzac legend and 'national myths of manhood' in the OLHA; in fact, Pierce only mentions the Anzac legend once, in passing, and issues of masculinity pass him by. He ends with a quotation from C.E.W. Bean in 1943, a lament for the 'deadness of vision' that Bean thought characterised Australia between the two world wars. 'How just is this reckoning?' Pierce wonders. 'What can be conceded and what contested in Bean's view of Australia...?' (155). Since he never answers his questions and provides no framework for doing so, readers will have no idea. This is one of several chapters in CHAL that ends by dissolving itself away into blandness and vagueness: that views of Australia's creative capacity at the time had 'many different registers' etc.

Who are national literary histories written for? Who actually reads or uses them? General readers would have little interest in these projects: what sort of general reader would pay well over \$100 to sift through chapters with compelling titles like 'The short story, 1890s to 1950' or 'Australian colonial poetry, 1788 – 1888'? The destination of sombre, heavy-weight national literary histories like CHAL is, of course, the library shelf, mostly in the tertiary education sector. But as reference works they are only partially useful because of their limited range, their selective choice and eclectic arrangement of material, and the often downright peculiar nature of their literary assessments. They compete unfavourably with the bibliographies and the increasing number of annotated digital databases currently available to scholars. Undergraduate students don't consult them because these kind of broad-based national literary histories contain snippets of information, not longer critical discussions. (This is why the traditional university presses also bring out 'Companions' to national literatures: splitting their markets by trying to offer students a more user-friendly alternative.) But postgraduate students don't find them useful either because their interests are specialist, not broad-based. A literary history like Pierce's CHAL will neither encourage nor facilitate research projects in the field: a student or academic researching the *Lone Hand* or the Australian Gothic, for example, will simply have no reason to consult it. Very few chapters in CHAL introduce anything that could properly be said to be new: a new perspective, a new critical model, a new way of arranging and understanding an aspect of the literary field, and so on. One of the ground-breaking chapters in the earlier OLHA was Robert Dixon's 'Literature and Melodrama', which used this generic term as a way of recovering and comprehending a neglected but popular and vibrant field of colonial literature (theatre, verse and fiction – and some early cinematic adaptations). Pierce's CHAL, however, has very little interest in genre and this means that the term 'melodrama' pretty much disappears altogether as if Dixon's chapter never existed (and in spite of the fact that Pierce had written about melodrama himself in his earlier book on Thomas Keneally). I remembered all the work that Dixon had done back in 1998 in order to recover this term and put it to good use. His chapter naturally enough began defiantly: 'For much of the twentieth century the terms "melodrama" and "melodramatic" have been used in a pejorative way' (66). But then I went back to the PNLHA and found that Elizabeth Webby had also written a chapter on 'Melodrama and the Melodramatic Imagination' ten years earlier, which began in exactly the same way: 'Melodrama...has for most of the twentieth century been used as a term of abuse' (210). Pick up a second-hand copy of the paperback 1988 Penguin literary history, if you can find one. Because (as well as being much cheaper than CHAL) this is where Australian literary history's 'new directions' both began and came to a grinding halt: where what follows is

generally either more of the same thing, or a peculiar kind of ossification which forgets about what happened before in order to try to do it all over again, but worse.

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