

Bruce Bennett. *Homing In: Essays on Australian Literature and Selfhood*. Perth: Network, 2006, 297pp.

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It would be difficult to be involved in Australian studies and not know who Bruce Bennett is. There might be others who are more ubiquitous—although few—but it is unlikely there is anyone who is more important.

Such a statement is inevitably arguable but my premise for making it is that in at least one definition, the most “important” is that element that does the most to add import to the object of discussion. Admittedly, Bruce Bennett’s published works do not have the significance of Manning Clark’s histories, Laurie Hergenhan’s various works as an editor or the coinages of Russel Ward, Humphrey McQueen, A. A. Phillips, Donald Horne, Robert Hughes, Paul Carter and so on. But the ideas of all of these and many more, and Australian studies in general, have often been carried on the back of Bruce Bennett.

Or else he has been pumping its tyres, or whatever metaphor comes to mind. In Australia, he has been at the forefront or behind the scenes of venture after venture. Going back to the beginnings of my association with ASAL, I associate Bruce with such luminaries as the Brians: Eliot, Kiernan and Matthews, and Alan Lawson, Barry Andrews and Elizabeth Webby, the devoted throng who first welcomed me. But the element that makes Bruce more important, at least in the eyes of this reviewer from the other side of the Pacific, is Bruce’s international efforts. Around the world, but particularly in Asia, Bruce has been the face of Australian studies.

Many years ago, Bernard Hickey—if you know who that is, he needs no introduction, if you do not he is impossible to describe—said to me that a literature is defined in its metropolis. This struck me as an amazingly perceptive comment. In other words, Canadian literature is defined by what it means to Toronto, American to New York, English to London and Australian to Sydney. This does not mean that one must like this. As a Canadian who lives in Toronto I support a popular Canadian attitude: I hate Toronto. However, in my summers in a much more hospitable place, Newfoundland, I recognise that Toronto is the place of definition.

Yet the corollary of this is another strange truth: the importance of that literature is never ultimately decided by that metropolis or even by the nation as a whole. Somebody must convince those outside the space that this

literature is significant. Which leads me back to Bruce Bennett. Around the world he has been gently nudging academics, writers and even politicians to recognise that Australia has produced some very worthwhile stuff.

Homing In collects many of the papers that Bennett has delivered at conferences around the world, and articles he has contributed to a range of literary journals and books since 1994. The range in this collection shows the knowledge of the person who has been steadfastly promoting Australian literature for years. Thus, while there is the inevitable Tim Winton in “Nostalgia for Community” (1994), Frank Moorhouse in “The Unsettled 1970s” (2004) and Dorothy Hewett in “Dorothy Hewett’s Garden and City” (1995), there is also a wider view of literature, including a more recent paper on Clive James and a 1997 consideration of the poetry of Paul Hasluck.

The role of the newcomer is considered through various writers, particularly Ee Tiang Hong, and, fitting Bennett’s own internationalism, there is significant attention to expatriates, most notably Peter Porter, in an essay that supplements Bennett’s earlier biography of Porter. Bennett also considers the writing met on his own travels, such as the poetry of Edwin Thumboo from Singapore. If there is a general theme it can be assembled from the titles of three essays that follow each other: “Sharing National Memories: Literary History in the Commonwealth” (2001) “A Family Closeness? Australia, India, Indonesia” (2003) and “Crossing Cultures: Australia and the Asia-Pacific” (2004).

“The ordinary Australian” is so common in statements of Australian culture one might think there is no other kind. As the saying goes, “We cut down tall poppies”. But ordinariness has often been depicted through an extraordinary Australianness, of the sort so lampooned by Patrick White. Yet there is a significant value to a certain type of the “ordinary” as observer. I think this is what Bruce Bennett provides in these essays. He is certainly more intelligent and more knowledgeable and more traveled than anyone who could be called “ordinary” and yet his very honest expressions of his very honest perceptions always have an air of ordinariness. When he says “I am not by any means an extraordinary Australian and my kind of experience would be reflected by many others” (135), I believe him.

These reflections of the experience of an extraordinary academic, experienced by a not-extraordinary Australian, have a warmth and generosity all too rare in both the academy and in Australia. And in Canada for that matter. I think the world is a better place for the presence of Bruce Bennett and I am sure the world knows more about Australia because of him.

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