

Is Australian Literature Global Enough?

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What Australian literature is seems simple enough. There is a polity called Australia, and there is literature of this polity. Even people who do not know one single Australian writer—and in the US there are still some even among the literate—understand that, theoretically, Australia can have a literature. Australia is still a defined space, although the recent work of Elizabeth McMahon and Suvendrini Perera on continental and island identity has problematised that. A national literature of a state with multiple land borders with other states seems both palpable and gratifying to problematise. When French literature has been so exalted as a body at once national and universal, there is a thrill in seeing Frenchness trickle out to neighbouring nations, or be inflected by them. Moreover, traditionally Australia has not been seen as a country involved in the great border-crossing and border-altering wars of the twentieth century, nor, earlier, was it involved in imperial contestation as was Africa. In today's globalised world, Australia is not really isolated, and Australian space contains even within its domestic borders many plural national imaginaries stemming from worldwide hybrid and diasporic identities, not to mention the potential permeability of Australia's seacoast, as recent refugee flows have epitomised. Australia has worlds within itself: Italian worlds, Chinese worlds, Arab worlds, Greek worlds, Islamic worlds, Buddhist and Orthodox Christian worlds. Formerly one could couch this in terms of Australia becoming more diverse, more multicultural; now one might have to speak of a plurality of Australias, including totally imaginary ones like the Inner Australia conjured in Gerald Murnane's *The Plains*. But, on the map, Australia seems this large island, a placid, magnified Britain of the South, and thus scores of recent academic projects that have taken on global literature and global modernities have rarely included Australia.

Yet it is really not so simple to describe what Australian literature is. Patrick White was brought up in Australia, lived his mature life in Australia, and wrote largely about Australia, but his years in England, his study of French and German culture, and his wartime sojourn in Greece and the Middle East, are crucial to understanding him. Christina Stead and Shirley Hazzard both grew up in Sydney, but both wrote their greatest work in New York, and are still considered—and considered themselves to be—Australian writers. Australia's most prestigious literary award, the Miles Franklin, originally was to be given only to a book that depicted 'Australian life in any of its phases.' These restrictive criteria were tacitly broadened only in the 2000s. In previous years, books set outside Australia were often deemed ineligible by the judging panels, as in the case of Frank Moorhouse's *Grand Days*. There has at times seemed to be a difference between Australian literature and literature written by Australians. When Lily Brett addressed a conference in Kansas City in 2002, she evinced concern about whether the audience would see her stories, largely about displaced Jews in the aftermath of the Holocaust, as 'Australian' enough. Indigenous writers, who were not offered citizenship in the Australian polity until 1967, affirming identities that the Australian state has often seemed premised against, are at once the most Australian of writers but also those given the most short shrift in a layperson's

understanding of the term. There are also writers in Australia writing in other languages than English: they are Australian too, are they not?

In turn, some writers, writing in English in Australia, may also belong to other nationalities. Ali Alizadeh is a well-known figure in both critical and creative terms on the Australian scene, lives in Australia and has published academic work on Australian literature, yet, when he was nominated for the 2014 Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award, his nationality was listed as Iranian. Jonathan Bennett is an Australian-identified Canadian writer whose publishing profile is nearly completely Canadian. Evie Wyld, a writer Australian in origin but largely operating in British national and literary space, won the 2014 Miles Franklin Literary Award over writers far more identified with Australia, such as Richard Flanagan, Tim Winton and Alexis Wright. Who is and is not an Australian writer seems highly variable. The Internet has made it possible to publish everything from anywhere, and a poet such as John Tranter, who is already as much at home imaginatively in Greenwich Village as in Balmain, could almost instantly generate a world public, both geographically scattered and attitudinally defined, during his editorship of the online periodical *Jacket*. Furthermore, just as Australian writers have always felt free to set their fiction in any area of the world (and have made studying music in Germany or exploring the source of the Nile as Australian as Henry Handel Richardson and Alan Moorehead did in their day), in the twenty-first century, world authors are using Australia as a setting. David Mitchell's 2014 novel, *The Bone Clocks*, is partly set in the nineteenth-century Australian bush, while the young American author Karen Russell sets her story 'The Seagull Army Descends on Strong Beach, 1979' in Australia so ingeniously that she does not have to mention the word, just to note the distance of America. If Australian literature from at least the time of the French-influenced work of Marcus Clarke and Christopher Brennan, and the German-inflected work of Richardson, has always tried to write into the world as well as the nation, now the world is turning the tables.

In addition, Australian literature has never had a set canon. Because it has been taught so sparsely in university settings even in Australia, there is not a secure body of works that everybody agrees on, merely a rather large set of writers, of whom most in the field have heard but few have read in their entirety. Ada Cambridge is a familiar name to scholars of Australian literature, yet although many eminent in the field have read her work and would be able to discourse about it convincingly, there are some who have not and could not. There is a heterogeneity that is pleasing in allowing for maverick micro-canon but jettisoning any sense of a consensus. In 1971, for example, the American aviator and travel writer Constance Helmericks could say that Australia's 'four outstanding writers are women' (91), and name them as Ernestine Hill, Mrs Aeneas Gunn, Mary Durack and Daisy Bates. Three years later, after White had garnered the Nobel, this would not have been possible, but Helmericks was not only percipient in advancing a feminist counter-canon but in understanding that canon-making in Australia has always had a do-it-yourself, home-grown quality. If Helmericks's characterisation of Australian literature—'tastes for plain, honest sunshine and sand and human grit'—hardly suits the Australian canon of the twentieth century as currently seen, it is comparable to some definitions of Australian literature mounted by critics then working within Australia. In the twenty-first century, indeed, there is so much of a plurality of canons that Helmericks's group, given its grounding criteria of white women writing about the frontier, seems arguably more plausible than it did in 1971. There is no consensus.

Even where there is a consensus, it can fray. 2013 saw the passing of Herbert C. Jaffa, an American Second World War veteran who, after serving in Victoria and Queensland in 1942, took part in Allied operations in New Guinea. Jaffa conceived a lifelong love of Australia and Australians, one of whose fruits was the research guide *Australian Poetry: 1920–1970*, published by Gale in 1979. Jaffa included poets born after 1901, a cut-off point that seems sensible if one's focus is the twentieth century. But what about the poets born in the late nineteenth century and active in the early twentieth, the Australian equivalents of T.S. Eliot and Hart Crane and H.D. Poets such as Leon Gellert, Australia's greatest First World War poet, number among that group; moreover they influenced the poetry of the 1920s and their younger contemporaries such as Kenneth Slessor, as Gellert did in *Desperate Measures* (1928). In leaving out poets born as late as 1901, Jaffa was leaving out some of Australia's modernity, in a curiously reciprocal gesture to most accounts of modern poetry in English, ignoring the modernities of Slessor, Lesbia Harford, or John Shaw Neilson.

In 2009, the Australian academic and novelist Nicholas Jose edited *The Macquarie Anthology of Australian Literature*, the most comprehensive and inclusive collection of Australian literature ever published. One can come to this book with every conceivable taste and find texts that will answer to and reward that taste. But Jose told me that several readers in Britain had noticed the absence from the book of Michael Thwaites, an Australian poet, intelligence officer, and muscular Christian who had received acclaim within the UK. After a quarter-century of immersion in the field of Australian literature, and with an interest in Christian poetry to boot, even I had not heard of Thwaites. My ignorance speaks to the point about no scholar possibly knowing everything, the sheer mathematical sublime of it all, which I mentioned above. But what struck me was Jose's wording: not just that these people felt that Thwaites was an Australian writer whom they admired, but that Thwaites was essential to their definition of Australian literature *as a term*; that a book of Australian literature that did not include him was disconcerting and puzzling.

There is a debate, in other words, about how Australian should Australian literature be. There are in essence two canons, an inner one of the books commonly accepted as Australian and institutionalised within syllabi, republished editions of classic texts, and the scholarly archive; and another of writers whose Australian identity is only asserted when specific neglected writers are championed (in the case of expatriates like Sumner Locke Elliott) or when the category itself is widened. It would be ideal if this category widening simply stretched the limits of the Australian literature we know, as just a form of putting new wine in old bottles. But the reality is that the stretching of the category redefines the category in ways that make it both, on the plus side, less predictable and dowdy, and, on the minus side, less operable and internally consistent.

The recent transnational turn in Australian literary studies is to be welcomed and ramified. But it should not lead to the wholesale dismissal of previous modes of Australian literary study. When I first entered the field, I read critics who emerged in the 1970s such as Julian Croft and Ken Stewart. I greatly admired their work, but did not see it as 'theory' in the same way as I saw other critics I was reading at the same time, such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha, or Henry Louis Gates Jr, as 'theory.' I now realise that in their own way, Stewart, Croft and their contemporaries were doing theory, insofar as they were challenging a consensus of the hegemony of canonical, Anglo-American literature. To widen Australian literature to include the diasporic,

the hybrid, the extraterrestrial and even, in the case of Karen Russell's story, the ersatz, does not mean defining its former core out of existence or seeing it as retrograde when it is not that.

Nor is the idea of Australia antithetical to that of the global. Other world-famous writers, such as Thomas Hardy or William Faulkner, are not seen as parochial just because they were local. This could be because, even in their localism, they addressed themes of racial and class division in major world powers; but it is also a recognition that not all-great Anglo-American literature is set in London or New York. In the nineteenth century, James Fenimore Cooper did not have to have English settings to appeal to a UK audience, and Dickens's portrait of America in *Martin Chuzzlewit* was certainly not designed to enhance his sales there. In Australian literature, though, there is still the idea that novels set in defined Australian local circumstances, such as Steven Carroll's fiction, are less viable on the world market. It is not global to see some parts of the world as less global than others; and if suburban Melbourne can be ruled out that way, we are just perpetuating the same hierarchies that led to seeing a single modernity circa 1920 rather than what are now termed 'multiple modernities' (Eisenstadt). We are ready to accept a more complicated and plural idea of Australian literature than what was there previously; we must, as Australianists, be prepared to ask of the world a commensurate recognition that Australia is as global as anywhere else.

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