Cynthia vanden Driesen and Bill Ashcroft, eds. *Patrick White Centenary: The Legacy of a Prodigal Son*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2014. 511 pp.
US$80.40
ISBN 978-1-4438-6040=6 (Hbk)
http://www.cambridgescholars.com/patrick-white-centenary

In 'Australia's Prodigal Son,' John Barnes records an emblematic moment in his life: his 1988 meeting with Patrick White at La Trobe University prior to what would be the author's final public address. Barnes recalls the overflowing crowd, the presence of TV cameras and the vociferous demands that the overflow crowd be allowed to sit in aisles or prop themselves against walls. To Barnes, the event, the size and fervor of the audience, was a milestone: 'This was my first experience of an Australian writer being treated as a celebrity' (3).

2012 marked the centenary of Patrick White's birth. Cynthia vanden Driesen, co-editor with Bill Ashcroft of *Patrick White Centenary: The Legacy of a Prodigal Son*, opens her 'Introduction' to the volume by remarking on White's recurring speculation 'as to whether his books would be read after his death' (xiii). Response to the centenary attests to White's continuing influence in literary and other matters. Convenors of the 6th ASAA (Association for the Study of Australia in Asia) Conference dedicated their December 2012 gathering to Patrick White. White scholars, established and rising, national and international, delivered a series of presentations over several days. This volume features expanded versions of these talks; a few additional pieces were solicited from scholars not present at the event. The editors have divided the contributions—*chapters*—into five sections: 'Revaluations,' 'Genre,' 'Individual Novels,' 'Comparative Studies' and 'Socio-Political Issues.' The five sections attempt to display White in his several roles—writer-artist, individual seeking a meaningful life, social critic, concerned citizen—and to reach a fuller understanding of his art. That the essays do not fit neatly into the above categories is acknowledged by vanden Driesen, but she hopes that readers will appreciate the 'great deal of interesting variety' to be found within and across essay groups.

Part I ('Revaluations') comprises nine essays ranging across White's life and works, reexamining what we know or once knew—but advising readers that White is more and does more than simple recollection might allow. Ashcroft comments that by the time of his passing, White's readership had declined. His works were 'too modernist, perhaps too literary, too transcendental, simply too hard' (222). Fresh explorations of his fiction spark renewed interest.

John Barnes's essay provides a foundation for the section and the larger volume. Barnes gives a synopsis of White's life—child of a landed family, educated in London, supported by parents to live and write in England—a life which seemed destined to follow a familiar expatriate pattern. After World War II, however, White returned to Australia with Greek expatriate Manoly Lascaris, his lifelong partner, and went on to produce the literary work that made him the 'celebrity' drawing an SRO crowd at La Trobe in 1988. Barnes considers the breakthrough novels—*The Aunt's Story* (1948), *The Tree of Man* (1955) and *Voss* (1957)—and the ways they ruptured a developing tradition. In his oft-cited 1958 essay 'The Prodigal Son,' White discussed writing *The Tree of Man*, how with this book he took on the 'public responsibility of filling . . . an immense void' (13). Although *Tree* bears the features of the settler saga, the protagonist Stan Parker seeks what his creator yearns to do: to 'discover the extraordinary behind the ordinary' (14). *Voss* resembles

superficially a history of exploration, but the author stresses his protagonist's inner journey as the expedition marches toward failure. To Barnes, White's subsequent novels would more overtly challenge readers and critics wanting to place him into a niche: 'White did more than any other writer to change the expectations of Australian readers and to liberate local writers from . . . the task of conforming to a notion of Australianness' (xx).

Bill Ashcroft and Lyn McCredden also include White biographical bits in their respective discussions, most notably the moment of indignity, cited in *Flaws in the Glass*, in which the author slipped and fell in the mud outside his home and experienced '[t]he famous moment of epiphany' (23), in which 'my disbelief appeared as farcical as my fall' (23). Ashcroft considers a recurring trope in White fiction: the colonial subject not at home in Australian space. Ernest Bloch's term *Heimat* addresses, for Ashcroft, the state of disruption or disturbance relevant to the Australian settler, 'the *home* that we have all sensed but have never experienced or known' (30). This home lies in the future; the present can provide moments of 'becoming,' i.e. epiphany linking Australians to the promise of utopia, the continent as home. Just as White's awakening to spiritual belief occurred through contact with the ordinary, so do White's characters find material objects as a gateway to the eternal, to *Heimat*. Amid the gathering menace of Nazi Germany, Himmelfarb, in *Riders in the Chariot*, finds hope in the tangible: 'God is in this table' (35). To White's fellow Australians uneasy on the continent, Ashcroft directs them to the ordinary and material as the site for 'becoming,' for finding the momentary illumination of *heimat*. As the epigraph to *The Solid Mandala* states: 'There is another world, but it is in this one' (41).

In her chapter Lyn McCredden overlaps with Ashcroft in key places. McCredden notes the insistent link between the spiritual and the base in his fiction: 'Excrement, the abject body and illumination are never far from each other in White's imagination' (48). To the author, says McCredden, the post-World War II world wanted the sacred as a counter to emptiness. Those in the novels who openly long for the sacred, such as Arthur Brown (*The Solid Mandala*), are usually considered mad, certainly foolish. Contrasted against an Arthur Brown is White's gallery of 'arrogant and self-willed characters [who] . . . undergo transformations, as they are led to an understanding of the self' (55): Voss, Hurtle Duffield, Elizabeth Hunter. For such ego-driven figures the encounter with the sacred involves 'learning the limits of human knowing' (57).

John McLaren explores transcendent experience in his chapter, asserting that without barriers dividing the nation from 'hostile peoples' (82), Australia has developed other borders of 'class, gender and ethnicity' (82). Additionally, settlers have found in the land an obstacle, as played out in *Voss* and *A Fringe of Leaves*. Once the European explorers move beyond the borders of settlement in the former novel, they lose control over the world; they must now rely on Aboriginal guides to continue their quest. McLaren sees *Fringe* as rife with border crossings in portraying Ellen Gluyas's path from maid to lady and wife; in her brief affair with her brother-in-law she crosses the border into the illicit. The shipwreck propels her into the uncivilised world, where she becomes servant to the Aboriginal people, beast of burden for their belongings, and then lover of escaped convict Jack Chance. McLaren joins other critics in connecting the abject to the transcendent in White. As Ellen reenters the civilised world, '[s]he is now permanently changed within . . . Ellen becomes fully human by experiencing cruelty, degradation and scorn' (90).

The most invigorating aspect of McLaren's essay appears in his discussion of *The Twyborn Affair*, in which he sees characters frustrated frequently by their inability to remove or transcend barriers.

The protagonist, Eudoxia/Eddie/Eadith, lives outside social boundaries, first as beautiful young woman, then as a station jackeroo, and finally as a woman again; gender borders persist throughout, blocking transcendence. As brothel madam Eadith in Part 3, she loves a man who could only accept her as a woman. The inner unity achieved by Voss before death or that Ellen claims on regaining civilisation is denied the protagonist here. *The Twyborn Affair* has, in McLaren's words, 'the least hopeful ending of any of White's novels' (96).

Bridget Grogan and Nathanael O'Reilly adhere to the title of the section, 'Revaluations,' in the truest sense. In her chapter, Grogan argues for the 'redemptive significance' of the body (63), countering those who see the body as a source of disgust in White's work. O'Reilly challenges prevailing critical views on White's relationship with Australian suburbia, employing *Riders in the Chariot* to proffer an alternate view. For O'Reilly, White's presentation of suburban Australia is too varied to be linked to a particular attitude or viewpoint.

In his chapter Satendra Nandan returns the focus to spiritual yearning. White believed that 'most people if they are honest with themselves have in them the germ of religious faith' (112). Nandan's interest lies in those figures who 'attempt to reach or reveal the Infinite in their lived lives or artistic creations' (110): Voss, Alf Dubbo and Hurtle Duffield. Nandan sees Hurtle Duffield as White's fullest vessel for dissecting the artist in his quest for Infinity. Duffield's ego dissolves as he takes on the sufferings of those about him, and only when he has a stroke—when he knows affliction—can he 'attain the vision of infinity for which he has sought all his life' (124). As the sole essay exploring *The Vivisector* at length, Nandan's piece is thought-provoking.

Pavritha Narayan adeptly considers the author's thorny relationship with his Australian audience in 'Patrick White and Australia: Perspectives of an Outsider.' Narayan begins by acknowledging the difficulty between author and readers: 'Australia has never been quite sure of its relationship with its Nobel Prize laureate who helped to place Australian literature on the international literary map' (1216). The essay propounds reasons for a reluctance to accept White as an Australian writer. To many, his 'novels are unrepresentative' (129). Narayan also targets the 'perceived formidableness' (128) surrounding his works as well as the image of White as a cranky old man. Narayan counters such images with those of White as a committed activist spurring on his country. Stating that it was his outsider status that forced on White the responsibility to speak out, Narayan remarks how the 'I' of the political White became over time a 'we,' as he recognised the need for collective action to enact his vision. An oft-cited declaration of the author was his refusal in 1988 to allow any of his work to be published, insisting that the Bicentenary highlighted the reality that there was 'too little in Australia's past and present . . . [to] feel proud of' (137). White's anger, in Narayan's view, revealed the author's belief in Australia's potential.

Jessica White, a relative of the author, addresses as well White's uneasy relationship with his country, echoing Ashcroft's remarks about the decline of readership over the past decades. Acknowledging the challenge required in completing a Patrick White novel, White evokes the image of the landscape and the implicit demand for an altered consciousness: '[O]n first glance [a Patrick White novel is like] a swathe of muted greys and greens that reveals itself to be hundreds of beautiful, tiny leaves, strips of bark, and minute blossoms' (149).

Essays in 'Revaluations' succeed generally in their aim. Readers are guided through salient aspects of White's life and led to reconsider the novels as integral milestones in his artistic quest; the nine

chapters as a whole offer the most substantive discussions of White and his fiction. Part III ('Individual Novels') also explores White the fiction writer. In her chapter, Meera Chand pays homage to her mentor, acknowledging the overpowering effect of *The Aunt's Story* upon her, as she retains her dog-eared copy of that novel even now: 'Writers need the friendship and inspiration of other writers' (212). The essay's strength lies in her remarks about *A Fringe of Leaves* particularly and historical fiction generally. For Chand, *Fringe* is the narrative of Ellen's spiritual journey, 'even in the most grotesque moments' (215), and Ellen's search is really the author's. A historical novelist herself, Chand responds to those challenging White for the liberties he has taken with his historical source—Eliza Fraser, her shipwreck and subsequent life among the Aborigines. The historical novelist has the luxury of viewing 'the unchanging plight of humanity across time' (218) and can speculate on other outcomes. Ellen Roxburgh leaves Eliza Fraser behind as she gains a fuller sense of herself through her travails.

Antonella Riem explores the meaning of *word* vs. *term* in her chapter. 'Term' names tools in a technological society; 'term' insists on power, dominance over others. To Voss language means terms. As Voss moves further into the interior, however, he grows beyond such limitations, communing in silence with the landscape and through telepathy with Laura. Word, by contrast, carries creative power. Voss discovers 'the freshness of words . . . Of Australia, with its long horizons, its sand, rocks, sticks' (227). Immersing himself in the Aboriginal landscape, Voss recognises that he must embrace new words and ways of knowing the world.

In his chapter, Hanish Mehta argues that White's narrative runs counter to convention: superior white does not vanquish inferior blacks. White sidesteps historical realities that saw the Europeans striving to displace, if not destroy the native population. Mehta claims that in the novel White 'creates an alternative history of Australia, a world in which whites and Aborigines might have co-existed' (245). Voss wants to reach out to the Aboriginal people, but his intent to dominate limits the success of that desire.

Indigenous scholar Jeanine Leane opposes Mehta's argument and in doing so, contributes an invigorating chapter. White has been theorised as having been sympathetic to Aboriginal matters, but Leane poses a series of unsettling questions using *Fringe* as the forum: Does the novel *further* the trope of Aborigines as noble savages? Is it a reconciliation text? Or does *Fringe* ultimately make the settler feel at home? In Leane's view, the novel tells Ellen's story, and '[t]he representation of Aboriginal society is secondary to his purposes' (261). White may have sought as an artist to alter reader consciousness, but Leane sees everywhere signs that the Aborigine remains forever the Other. As Ellen lives among the tribe, for instance, she loses all sense of time, and Leane finds the time/timeless dichotomy fraught: '[T]imelessness naturalises the concept of Aboriginal society as undeveloped and innocent' (260). Although Ellen's time among the Aboriginal people proves essential to her spiritual growth, these people have 'nothing to learn from this interaction' (261). *A Fringe of Leaves* traces Ellen through myriad milestones; the Aboriginal subject, in the meantime, is denied opportunity for discovery or change. Leane insists that in *Fringe* the Aborigine remains Other, only important as a learning tool for white Australia. White is lauded throughout the volume for his sympathy to Aboriginal Australians; Leane develops a convincing case for the limitations of that sympathy.

The remaining essays in Part III move us—with some relief—to consider others of Patrick White's novels. These include his first novel, *The Happy Valley*, and his last, *The Twyborn Affair* and the

recently published *Hanging Gardens*. The latter is considered to have been two-thirds completed at White's death and was published in 2009 at David Marr's urgings. *Happy Valley* and *Hanging Garden* both feature children at their centre. Elizabeth Webby and Margaret Harris consider both works together, linking them for their depictions of unhappy children claiming outsider status in modern Australia. Of the eight main characters in *HV*, two are children: Rodney, a sickly boy who spends much time reading, and Margaret, a part-Chinese girl. Both are offspring of unhappy marriages, and White projects fictionalised versions of his unhappy childhood memories onto these two. It is worth remarking that *Happy Valley* precedes the author's epiphanic fall in the mud; as Webby and Harris state, the novel promotes White's early view that '[l]ife . . . was something to be endured. Celibacy seemed the only way to avoid misery and violence' (275). As for White's vaunted fictional moments of transcendence, the authors find none in *Valley* but speculate that the completed *Hanging Garden* might have included a place for love. In a separate piece, Alistair Niven argues that *Hanging Garden* is a complete work, that White abandoned his plans for a three-part work in the mode of *The Aunt's Story* as *Hanging Garden* took shape. Though the fate of the two orphaned refugee children, Gilbert and Eirene, is unclear as the manuscript and World War Two ends, to Niven, 'Gilbert and Eirene are complete as they are' (206). Both essays might be viewed as calls for readers to try White's less familiar fiction.

The final chapter in this section, Brian Kiernan's 'Patrick White: Twyborn Moments of Grace,' places the novel in its publication context, the late 1970s. That period also saw the rise of literary theory supplanting literary criticism as a means of interpreting texts. *The Twyborn Affair* merits decoding rather than analysis. Throughout the novel, Kiernan points out, readers will find instability. One of his examples appears in Part I, which reads as though this is the world of Henry James or Edith Wharton. But then amid the cultured aura, M Pelletier ejaculates on seeing Eudoxia. Although the orgasm is provoked by Eudoxia's stunning beauty, readers cannot be certain whether the moment is grand or sordid. The novel is rife with contradictory interpretive possibilities, and Kiernan's discussion is absorbing in its detailing of the rich and bewildering nature of White's last major work of fiction. When he wonders whether new readers caught up in the seeming chaos of this work would find the earlier fiction sufficiently engaging, Kiernan affirms White as achieving one measure of greatness. Even as tastes shift, White will find new readers.

The three other sections of the volume fall under the 'great deal of interesting variety' noted by vanden Driesen. Take Part II ('Genre'), which comprises four essays. There is one addressing Patrick White the playwright (May-Brit Akerholt), another considering Patrick White as portrait versus photographic subject (Greg Battye), one comparing Fred Schepisi's film version of *Eye of the Storm* with White's original novel (Sissy Heiff) and one glancing at the poetry of White and novelists Katharine Susannah Prichard (Glen Phillips). These pieces are diverting curiosities. Yes, White wrote plays, and critics placing White firmly in the anti-suburban camp might use *A Season at Sarsaparilla* or *Big Toys* as their ammunition. The photograph in question adorns the cover of the text, and the directness of White's gaze might lead readers to feel justified in inferring meaning of several kinds as Battye has done (though they would probably not follow Battye in delineating White's childhood miseries as visible elements of the expression). The *Eye of the Storm* discussion gives greater attention to Schepisi than to White, but it invites the question as to why other of White's novels have not reached the screen. *Voss* and *A Fringe of Leaves* would seem prime cinematic properties. That White wrote early, imitative poetry and that he omitted mentioning writing poetry in *Flaws in the Glass* underscores how Phillip's discussion is valuable to Patrick

White devotees only. Indeed, I could apply that assessment to Part II as a whole; those with sufficient grounding in and dedication to Patrick White are the target audience for 'Genre.'

With Section IV ('Comparative Studies'), the volume shifts to White's influence in a global context. Isabel Alonso-Breto discusses White's first published story, 'The Twitching Colonel,' in conjunction with a 2009 Sri Lankan novel; she sees White as ushering in a new field of study with that story: 'Commonwealth literature.' Mark Williams juxtaposes Australia's leading twentieth-century writer against the era's leading New Zealand poet, James K. Baxter. The essay considers both men as intellectuals with a defined religious or spiritual vision in an era in which both Australia and New Zealand sought to reshape their identities. Both authors attacked the 'thinness of local intellectual life' (356), and both subscribed to activist concerns, such as opposition to nuclear testing in the Pacific or increased rights for the Indigenous population. Williams notes, however, that despite White's public advocacy, the author had minimal contact with Aboriginal Australia.

The three remaining contributions in this section suggest White's larger influence outside of Australia. Gursharan Aurora delivers a substantive examination of the transcendent White in 'The Unity of Being—Synergies between White's Mystic Vision and the Indian Religio-Spiritual Tradition.' Aurora's stated aim involves tracing the author's philosophy and religious belief through his novels. He cites a defining White statement: 'Religion. Yes, that's behind all my books. What I am interested in is the relationship between the blundering human being and God' (320). Voss, for instance, as he recognises the beauty of the interior landscape, is drawn out of himself. Late in the novel he speaks in a changed manner: 'I have no plan . . . but will trust to God' (325).

One question underlying the essay is whether White used Indian motifs deliberately. White adhered to the Indian view that suffering is necessary for progress. Aurora cites several White characters whose spiritual journey encompasses suffering. Theodora Goodman lives without meaningful human contact, then pays a dear price for illumination; she 'renounces her sanity in order to understand the divine truth' (332). Stan Parker confronts the ordinary trials awaiting husband, father and bush farmer and does so with 'a sense of acknowledged detachment' (332). The transcendence he seeks reveals itself through the ordinary as well: a cluster of trees, a group of clouds, a 'gob of spittle' (332).

Ishmeet Kaur further explores White in relation to Indian belief, joining a Sikh scriptural text designed to appeal to all castes with White's fiction, especially *The Tree of Man*. To make clear the comparison, Kaur identifies key tenets of the *Gurugranth Sahib*, conveying details of its history and role as a resistant text. The scriptural text challenges institutional religion as did White. In her chapter, Julie Mehta explores three fictional outcasts, remarking on the persistent human inability to accept difference, even in a globalised world. Mehta highlights the outsider status of the three figures: Dubbo, the man of Aboriginal descent; Gemmy, the white man raised among blacks attempting re-entry of the colonial world; and Velutha, Roy's untouchable. Mehta follows each to his death, stressing that the martyrdom of the lowest threatens those at the top. The essay gains its greatest strength and moment of deepest relevance in discussing Velutha and Roy. Considering that Roy used her Booker Prize fame for speaking out against treatment of the untouchables and that the essay was first a conference talk, I find Mehta's summary remarks memorable: 'India, more than any other place, can do with a persistent mega dose of White's persistent questions about how we should treat our sisters and brothers who still live on the fringe' (379).

The final section ('Socio-Political Issues') is frankly a bit puzzling. In addition to being an internationally renowned writer, White developed a public persona as social activist. Fred Chaney AP delivered the conference keynote; its written version appears, entitled 'Australia and its First Peoples.' Chaney surmises the reason for his selection as plenary speaker was that he (Chaney) is an expert on one of the issues White saw as central to Australian life: 'Australia's treatment of its Indigenous people' (384). He connects Australia and India as democracies allowing citizens to speak their minds without fear of retribution, adding that White was prone to 'rail against the government of the day' (387). He likens White's intellectual trajectory to that of his nation, 'a move from ignorance and indifference to consciousness and concern' (386). Accepting the award for Australian of the Year in January 1974, White identified what he saw as the nation's great challenge: '[W]e still have that apparently insoluble problem of what to do about the Aborigines we dispossessed' (387).

The other essays in the section use Patrick White as touchstone or reference point for extended discussions on Australian issues: Mabo (Anne de Souza); the 'quest to feel at home on the land' (Kieran Dolin); possible abuse of the Aboriginal population at Belltrees, the White family station (Vicki Grieves); a suggested manifesto for Indigenous identity (Keith Truscott); Australia's failure to become a republic (Stephen Alomes); and the current state of the Muslim community in Australia (Amear Ali). Ali cites White's statement, 'All races—all faiths—can I feel, be brought together if we try' (486), as being a fitting testament to the author's greater legacy. The content of Part V, however, is at best loosely tied to the author and better suited to an international conference with a wide-ranging theme than to a volume dedicated in title and theme to a writer.

Patrick White Centenary: Legacy of a Prodigal Son has many strengths. 'Revaluations' and 'Individual Novels' display the range and development of White's novels and connect the works to memorable moments or statements from the author. Essays remind or inform readers of the profundity of his work, of the challenge to reading and the great rewards awaiting readers. (In the wake of reading this volume, I read *Riders in the Chariot* for the first time.) Essays in Parts II, IV and V in their strongest moments flesh out our sense and image of Patrick White. He was a playwright and failed poet; his fiction has resonated beyond Australia and continues to spark fresh comparisons with superficially unlikely works; his disappointment in and hope for Australia connected him to issues that still trouble the nation. If I find certain inclusions unsatisfying, I find the volume a worthy homage to Australia's Nobel Laureate, for whom that packed house at La Trobe 'responded with a perfect storm of applause' (4). I must, however, remark on the slipshod presentation that arises often enough to mar the effect. Misplaced or absent punctuation, problems with syntax (fragments, run-ons, sentences that do not work), spacing problems (as in no space separating words or sentences)—surely someone could have proofread the finished manuscript more carefully! I think of Patrick White in his image as 'a cranky old man' and imagine a peevish look overcoming him as he perused this 500-plus page book dedicated to him as the 'Prodigal Son.'

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