

‘Outside the Circle of One’s Own Experience’: George Orwell, Kylie Tennant and the Politics of Poverty During the Yellow Book Period

**ELLA MUDIE
INDEPENDENT AUTHOR AND SCHOLAR**

Today, the extremity of the many situations within which George Orwell (born Eric Blair, 1903-1950) placed himself with a view to writing about them is widely appreciated. It is part of the Orwell legend, for instance, that the author wrote to his publisher from the battlefield in Spain explaining that he would like to ‘come out of this alive if only to write a book about it’ (Orwell to Gollancz). That the young Orwell lived among tramps in London and washed dishes as a *plongeur* in Parisian hotels is likewise frequently mentioned alongside his pilgrimage into the homes of impoverished miners which forms the basis of his reportage memoir, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937). While the ‘write what you know’ mantra is now commonplace, George Watson has argued that ‘Orwell was the first writer of consequence in the European tradition . . . to make things happen to himself in order that he should write out what happened’ (657). Watson’s observation—intended as an affirmation of sorts—can also be taken as a yardstick against which to measure the polarised responses that Orwell’s reliance on lived experience attracts. As Peter Marks has pointed out, ‘Orwell functions almost as a test case for the protean nature of reputation’ (85). In light of the growing scepticism directed towards the use of the participant-observer mode as a literary device, Orwell’s present-day legacy as a champion of the poor and the oppressed (Rodden; Ingle) appears increasingly unstable.

Less well-known to international audiences but familiar to Australian readers is the work of novelist Kathleen (Kylie) Tennant (1912–1988) whose desire to experience first-hand the conditions of Depression era poverty also led her to seek out encounters with the poor. The young author first attracted attention for making unchaperoned tours of country regions of New South Wales and using the insights and experience from these peripatetic trips to inform her novels *Tiburon* (1935) and later *The Battlers* (1941). Tennant boarded in Sydney’s so-called ‘slum’ suburbs while writing *Foveaux* (1939) and even went so far as to impersonate a prostitute in order to land herself in gaol as research for an early iteration of *Tell Morning This* (1967). As in Orwell’s case, these unorthodox research methods attracted publicity and eventually became synonymous with Tennant’s approach. A ‘purposeful traveller’ in the eyes of some (Attard 94), Tennant’s motivation partially resembles that of a journalist in search of copy, but the author genuinely ‘felt for, and championed, the underdog and battler, and sharing their lives allowed her to write novels that were highly popular’ (Shannon). This commitment to social realism has in part contributed to the ‘ambiguous status of Kylie Tennant’s work in the Australian canon’ (Carter 179). It is not a situation entirely unique to Tennant in so far as many novels from this period ‘belong to that literary genre in which a substantial documentary core is leavened with some of the conventions of fiction. It is a genre which, in Australia at least, has been consistently under-valued’ (Matthews 69). As a result of the relative neglect of Tennant’s work locally, there has been little exploration further afield of the relevance of her documentary fiction within an international context.

Never directly associated with or influenced by each other, Orwell and Tennant nonetheless shared a belief that if the conditions of poverty were to be changed, they must first be understood, and that in order to *know* the poverty of working-class life in any meaningful way, the writer of middle-class origins was obliged to bridge through experience the chasm of ignorance, bias and class prejudice that he or she had inherited from birth. This impetus to understand and to publicise the conditions of poverty as part of a broader, left-wing agenda was also a founding principle of the publishing house of Victor Gollancz, established by Gollancz in England in 1927 and from 1936 onwards home to the Left Book Club. Gollancz, with his interest in mobilising the book in the fight against poverty, fascism and the threat of war, provides a link between the career trajectories of Tennant and Orwell that is not well studied. Gollancz was the publisher of Orwell's first five books including *Down and Out in Paris and London* in 1933 and was the driving force behind *The Road to Wigan Pier*, which he commissioned and later distributed through the Left Book Club. Kylie Tennant's contact with Gollancz was less direct but no less pivotal, as her agents judiciously placed *Foveaux*, a fictional portrait of working-class life in the inner-city suburb of Surry Hills, with the house of Gollancz after it failed to attract an Australian publisher.

From an historical perspective, the progressive house of Victor Gollancz provided, then, a launch pad of sorts for the fledgling authors at a time when both Tennant's and Orwell's development as writers intersected with a turn to documentary realism that resonated with the motivation of the left-wing publisher to publicise the conditions of poverty to a mass audience. A reconsideration of the political climate, in particular the urgency with which it was considered necessary to understand poverty first-hand in the 1930s, is therefore useful for contextualising the embodied approach to the representation of poverty adopted by Orwell and Tennant, and their shared emphasis on deriving insights from lived experience. By seeking to draw the poor quite literally into 'the circle of one's own experience' (Orwell to Gollancz) both writers turned to ethnographic and sociological techniques that position them as pioneers of the participant-observer mode in twentieth-century fiction and non-fiction. At the same time, comparisons between the 1930s output of Orwell and Tennant reveal significant differences in the influence of gender, genre and geography upon the representation of poverty, and its ethical implications, in their respective works published by Gollancz.

Victor Gollancz and the 'Yellow Book' Period

'The years 1935–9 were the period of anti-Fascism and the Popular Front, the heyday of the Left Book Club,' Orwell reflects in his 1940 essay, 'Inside the Whale,' a period in which 'it was hardly possible to remain politically indifferent' (120–21). One of the key figures of the period was the Left Book Club's founder—publisher and humanitarian, Victor Gollancz (1893–1967), a supporter of left-wing causes who was not in the least 'politically indifferent.' A strong-willed former teacher, Gollancz established his bold new publishing house (Murphy) in London in 1927 where he quickly proved himself 'a daring and innovative publisher . . . determined to reach and influence the mass audience' (Barrick Neavill 198). Gollancz had a flair for marketing, and the striking typographical dust jackets that he developed with the influential typographer Stanley Morison guaranteed that the firm's 'vivid black, magenta and yellow-covered books were soon filling the shops and bookstalls' (Hodges 32). Yet Gollancz's entrepreneurial spirit and 'Messianic approach' (Hodges 160) to publishing also had its detractors, some of whom would later reflect derisively on the legacy of the 'Yellow Book period' as falsely representing 'the most glorious era in British Socialist history' (Dudley Edwards 558).

The publishing list of Victor Gollancz Ltd reflected its founder's interest in the politics of the Left and commitment to the advancement of socialism. Unsurprisingly, many of the more earnestly committed texts were not great sellers. As such, 'Gollancz ensured a financial security for his firm with a general list based on popular fiction and detective stories' while 'his central mission lay in publishing progressive political books' (Barrick Neavill 199). By the mid-thirties, the fiction list had achieved a level of prestige with Gollancz responsible for publishing 'many of the most highly regarded contemporary novelists' (Hodges 89), among them Elizabeth Bowen, Ford Madox Ford, Joyce Cary, Daphne du Maurier, Ivy Compton-Burnett, Elizabeth Jenkins and, of course, Orwell (although his literary reputation was not yet fully established at this point). The ambition to politically educate readers, however, was most successfully realised through the activities of the Left Book Club. Started by Gollancz in 1936 and generally considered to be Britain's first modern book club, it was founded with the simple aim to distribute an informative monthly book choice at a reduced price. The club grew quickly in popularity—at its peak in 1939 the membership stood at 57,000 (Barrick Neavill 198). The monthly titles were selected by a committee headed by Gollancz alongside Labour politician and writer John Strachey, and political theorist, Harold Laski, for whom collectively the basic idea was to

produce a series of books dealing with the three closely related questions of fascism, the threat of war, and poverty, aiming at effective resistance to the first, prevention of the second, and socialism as a cure for the third,' at prices within the reach of a mass readership. (Barrowman 62)

Quickly expanding into a political movement of sorts, the efforts of the LBC did not stop at distribution of books. Gordon Barrick Neavill has suggested that the LBC 'deserves much of the credit for focusing attention on poverty in Britain' (214); its indefatigable activities in this area ranged from organising talks and film screenings to making tours of the slum areas of East London and the formation of a distressed-areas study group. The rapid ascendancy of Victor Gollancz's publishing house and the success of the complementary Left Book Club speaks, then, to the era's intertwined relationship between literary production and political commitment, and simultaneously, the centrality of poverty to the major social, political and moral issues of the day. To this end, the 1930s produced a significant peak of poverty literature in Britain (Kumar; Korte). It was through a shared interest in poverty that the early writings of a young George Orwell (still known then as Eric Blair) came within the orbit of Victor Gollancz. Each of Orwell's fiction and non-fiction works of the 1930s is concerned to some extent with the issue of poverty. This essay limits its focus to Orwell's first published full-length manuscript, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (hereafter *Down and Out*), which distils roughly five years of 'intermittent excursions' into the slums of East London (Beadle 190) and nearly two years spent in a working-class district of Paris, and *The Road to Wigan Pier* (hereafter *Wigan Pier*), arguably Orwell's most important record of poverty (Rodden; Ingle). These two books share an intimacy, directness and sense of moral urgency that emanates from the first-hand nature of the recollections shared. Both represent important points of intersection with the publishing activities of the Left, in particular the efforts of Victor Gollancz.

Orwell and the Discomforts of Poverty

In the spring of 1928 Orwell relocated to Paris with the motivation 'to live cheaply while writing two novels' and 'also to learn French' (Orwell, 'Introduction' 221). Having earned little from his literary efforts he was eventually forced to look for work—the ensuing ten weeks

spent in the autumn of 1929 working as a dishwasher and kitchen porter represent ‘the only time he was seriously poor’ in Paris (Davison 6). As befits a novel drawn from lived experience, the poverty depicted in *Down and Out* is very much of an individual nature as it sketches (and lightly fictionalises) the circumstances of the various ‘lowlife’ characters he encountered. This sensitivity to background and biography implies a certain social mobility that is not present in *Wigan Pier* which records, rather, Orwell’s perceptions of an entrenched lack and general impoverishment as characteristic of the daily life of the working-class in England. Where the latter book adopts the style of a report, *Down and Out* ‘is in effect a journal,’ as Raymond Williams points out: ‘What is put in is the experience of being without money in a modern city: the experience of dishwashers and tramps, of filthy rooms, dosshouses, casual wards. The author is present, but only insofar as these things are happening to him along with others’ (Williams 42). In the book’s opening pages, the narrator reflects upon his rationale for providing this literary account of his Paris days:

Poverty is what I am writing about, and I had my first contact with poverty in this slum. The slum, with its dirt and its queer lives, was first an object-lesson in poverty, and then the background of my own experiences. It is for that reason that I try to give some idea of what life was like there. (*Down and Out* 5)

The passage is representative of Orwell’s complicated attraction to poverty and the range of purposes that it served for his personal, professional and moral development. The notion of making ‘first contact’ and undergoing an ‘object-lesson,’ for instance, highlights the profound *otherness* of poverty for Orwell and the uncomfortable basis of his *bildungsroman* in an ethos of discovery and exploration that cannot help but exoticise the poor. The fact that Orwell was not long returned from five years’ service with the Imperial Police Force in Burma only further problematises this notion of making ‘contact’ with the poor—an uncomfortable reminder of what Seth Koven identifies as the ‘impact of imperialism on slumming’ from the Victorian era onwards when ‘the metropolitan slums and distant outposts of empire were linked in the British imperial imagination as places of freedom and danger, missionary altruism and sexual opportunity’ (Koven 21). Orwell went on to present an incisive critique of the imperialist ethos in *Burmese Days* (1934), demonstrating his sensitivity to the oppression and exploitation underscoring Britain’s governance of its colonies. Still, the author is unable to fully jettison the colonising tendencies that he brings to bear upon his project to uncover the truth of poverty at home by going ‘native’ in the western nations of England and France.

Orwell reworked the manuscript that would eventually become *Down and Out* several times (Rodden) and it did not find publication easily. Among the early critics was T.S. Eliot who rejected it as reader for *Faber and Faber* on formal grounds, deeming it ‘ill constructed’ (Ingle 30). After a close friend placed the manuscript in the hands of literary agent Leonard Moore it eventually met a favourable reception with the ‘bold new’ publishing house of Victor Gollancz, whose readers ‘regarded it as an important document about the lives of the poor, which deserved the public’s attention’ (Ingle 30–31). Thus Orwell’s engaging memoir promised to bridge the gap between broad popular appeal and a politically educative function by bringing awareness to an issue that was of vital importance to the Left at that time. The book helped establish a popular image of Orwell as a ‘Common Man,’ argues Rodden, who notes that reviewers ‘immediately lauded the author of *Down and Out* for his “great sympathy with the man on the street”’ (177). In this way, the representation of poverty in *Down and Out* was from the outset constructed as a kind of social good, whose sympathetic identification with the poor cancelled out any potential reservations about the author’s use of slumming or ‘class-passing’ (Korte; Betensky) as the evidential basis for its insights.

Yet Orwell's methods were not based solely on observation—he was a *participant*-observer and as such making 'contact' with the poor represented a profoundly embodied or corporeal experience for the author. Margery Sabin emphasises Orwell's desire to 'break through what he regards as middle-class oblivion' wherein his 'corrective to such falsity comes first by immersion of his own body—supreme measure of truth for Orwell—directly into the misery of experience' (45). For Michael Amundsen, Orwell was 'a master at drawing in the reader to see and feel the worlds of his subjects,' a practitioner of an 'embodied ethnography [that] brings the reader into contact with the sights, smells and feelings of his subject and their milieu' (24). Indeed, the descriptions of the deleterious physical and mental effects wrought by poverty upon the body make for some of *Down and Out*'s most memorable passages. Having gone without food in Paris for several days, for instance, we learn how:

Hunger reduces one to an utterly spineless, brainless condition, more like the after-effects of influenza than anything else. It is as though one had been turned into a jellyfish, or as though all one's blood had been pumped out and lukewarm water substituted. (*Down and Out* 37–38)

This emptying out of the self produced by hunger speaks to the transformative nature of the encounter with poverty for Orwell, the manner in which being 'down and out' quite literally allows him to experience the sensation of becoming *someone else*. Its self-serving purpose is at odds with the more benevolent reading of Orwell as an empathic practitioner of 'embodied ethnography' (Amundsen 24). The limits of empathic identification are further revealed through the prevalence of the twin affects of disgust and repulsion manifest throughout *Down and Out*, with the body of the tramp, in particular, frequently figuring as a site of comingled repulsion and attraction. Confined spaces intensify such reactions as in the scene in one dosshouse bathroom where the sight of 'Fifty dirty, stark-naked men elbowing each other in a room twenty-feet square, with only two bath-tubs and two slimy roller towels between them all,' makes him shudder: 'I shall never forget the reek of dirty feet' (154). Carolyn Betensky has argued that not only does the surrender to poverty's powerlessness hold a certain fascination for the author but that the 'pleasure Orwell experiences in this splitting of his subject is on the order of bliss' (137). Simulations of poverty thus 'allow at once for the consolidation of entrenched modes of bourgeois subjectivity and for a blissful "escape" from them by means of a continually shifting, contrapuntal notion of the other' (130). Betensky's analysis is important for its acknowledgement of the advantageous aspects to slumming often glossed in readings of *Down and Out*. Furthermore, it emphasises not only the power imbalance that exists between the dominant versus dominated classes during the 'class-passing' encounter but also the principal shortcoming of the participant-observer mode in its capacity to perpetuate rather than dissolve class divisions.

At the level of readerly enjoyment, the heightened visceral quality of Orwell's prose contributed to the popular success of *Down and Out*. By the time that Gollancz came to publish *Wigan Pier*, however, the relationship of sensation to *otherness* in Orwell's treatment of poverty was emerging as a more contentious issue. According to Gollancz's biographer, Ruth Dudley Edwards, making selections for the Left Book Club presented Gollancz with an 'intellectual dilemma,' in so far as 'only orthodox communist authors could be relied on to see things his way, while diplomacy and his need for good books forced him to commission others from time to time' (266). When Gollancz sent Orwell to report upon the living conditions of the miners, factory workers and long-term unemployed of England's industrial north he certainly did not fit the profile of an orthodox communist author. More accurately, the publisher regarded Orwell as 'a promising young writer with a gift for detail' (Rodden

108). The first part of the resultant text draws heavily from the diaries that Orwell kept during his winter spent in the heavy industry areas of Barnsley, Sheffield and Wigan, and thus largely met with Gollancz's expectation to receive an engaging eye-witness account of the evils of poverty.

The second section, however, sees Orwell shift from his 'rather fragmentary account of various things I saw in the coal areas of Lancashire and Yorkshire' (Orwell, *Wigan Pier* 113), into an explanatory mode as he volunteers reasons and potential remedies for the poverty earlier described. Offering up a scathing attack on middle-class socialist intellectuals in an erratic style of argument, this subsequent part proved extremely problematic for Gollancz. Those descriptive qualities of the first section that exemplify the author's 'gift for detail' become a liability in Part II when the preoccupation with the odours of poverty, for instance, gives way to extended contemplation of the matter of whether the lower classes smell. It is only natural that they should, Orwell asserts matter-of-factly, because 'as a whole, they are dirtier than the upper classes' (*Wigan Pier* 121). Therefore it 'is a pity,' he goes on, 'that those who idealise the working class so often think it necessary to praise every working-class characteristic and therefore to pretend that dirtiness is somehow meritorious in itself' (*Wigan Pier* 121). The habitual nature of the poverty observed by Orwell, combined with the manner in which '[a] thousand influences constantly press a working man down into a *passive rôle*' (*Wigan Pier* 44), led him to conclude that any radical upheaval by the working-class seemed quite unlikely. Orwell's tone was 'inflammatory, calculatedly so,' says Rodden. 'Critics on the Left agreed about little, except that *Wigan Pier* was cause for anger' (Rodden 106).

Initially Gollancz sought to print only the first section but when Orwell objected, he settled upon inserting a lengthy foreword (not read by Orwell prior to publication) with a view to making its content more palatable to the Left Book Club's members. Rodden suggests that the interest of Part II for Gollancz was 'chiefly psychological, an exposé of a middle-class mind in rebellion.' In the foreword he assumes, then, the role of "'reputation-suppressor," a contending voice literally "getting inside" Orwell's book with the effect of downplaying Orwell's criticisms of the Left and undercutting his credibility and "true rebel" persona' (Rodden 107). The topic of whether the working-classes smell was especially vexatious for Gollancz. He insists that while 'Mr. Orwell is exaggerating violently' (xv) his hyperbole is nonetheless instructive of the magnitude of effort needed to overcome inherited class biases:

This section will be, I think, of the greatest value to middle-class and working-class members of the Left Book Club alike: to the former because, if they are honest, they will search their own minds; to the latter, because it will make them understand what they are "up against"—if they do not understand it already. In any case, the moral is that the class division of Society, economic in origin, must be superseded by the classless society . . . in which alone the shame and indignity so vividly described by Mr. Orwell—I mean of the middle class, not of the lower class—will be impossible. (Gollancz xv–xvi)

Today the foreword to *Wigan Pier* stands apart as a heavy-handed intervention into Orwell's text that is incongruous with the modern emphasis on respecting the autonomy of the author. From an historical perspective, however, it represents a valuable paratext providing important insights into the unique set of circumstances that brought *Wigan Pier* into existence. Its tensions speak to the broader debate over how best to represent the 'shame and indignity' of poverty, and middle-class obliviousness of it, that was a central issue of the period, dividing critics, publishers and writers on the question of the relationship of literature to political

commitment and social reform. Valerie Meyers has suggested that ‘Orwell’s argument is too subjective and negative for the commissioned purpose of the book, but for Orwell the journey had another agenda, to sort out his relationship to working people’ (13). The unorthodox political views put forward only deepened the ideological rift between Gollancz and Orwell, foreshadowing the rejection of *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) that marked the near end of this turbulent yet fruitful publishing relationship. Yet such conflicts were by no means unique to Gollancz and Orwell. In the lead up to the Second World War the imperative to represent poverty in literary form was felt by writers of social conscience around the world, many of whom—including Kylie Tennant—would also make their way onto the list of Victor Gollancz.

Poverty’s Parochial Battlelines

Just as Orwell had in the late 1920s immersed himself among the ‘submerged working-class’ of France and England (Orwell, *Wigan Pier* 78) as part of his insistence on ‘discovering for himself the realities of how the poor lived’ (Clarke ix), by the early 1930s a young Kylie Tennant had also undergone her own explorations into Depression era poverty. Making trips into the Australian bush she witnessed firsthand the living conditions of the rural fringe dwellers whom she would depict in her debut novel, *Tiburon* (1935). The book imparts a preoccupation with the ‘battler,’ a person who responds to the constraints of hardship with a particularly resilient spirit, and depicts a distinctly Australian category of poverty that Tennant herself had some part in constructing. This theme was further developed in Tennant’s third novel, *The Battlers* (1941), another nomadic documentary fiction this time published in England by Gollancz as part of the contract for *Foveaux* (1939) which gave the publisher an option on her next novel. Perhaps coming to his attention by way of the connection to Gollancz, Orwell included *The Battlers* in a 1941 group review of ‘New Novels’ for *The New Statesman and Nation* in which he dedicates around 300 words to Tennant’s ‘very long novel about Australia’ (Orwell ‘New Novels,’ 90) By this time Orwell was an established voice on the conditions of poverty. He thus imparts a sense of authority when he writes that the book is ‘sincere in feeling all through and about all its subject matter is new and extremely interesting’ in so far as:

It is about a class of people hardly anyone in England can ever have heard of, the Australian rural unemployed, the families who travel to and from in ramshackle buggies and caravans, stealing sheep from the farmers and occasionally eking out their dole with odd jobs at sheep-shearing or fruit-picking. Effectively they are tramps, but, since they are in a richer and more democratic country, far less abject and poverty-stricken than their opposite numbers in England. (Orwell, ‘New Novels’ 90)

Orwell is able to appreciate the achievements of *The Battlers*, Brian Matthews has argued, ‘because he recognises instantly—and approves—the ground on which the novel must be met: it is documentary, tending towards social realism, contains social criticism, but Tennant mitigates the potential rigidity of all this by casting it in fictional form and submitting it to the methods of fiction’ (66). The review represents an example of the kind of ‘semi-sociological literary criticism’ that Orwell was practising at this time (Matthews 66) and which, in the case of Tennant’s novel, he praises on the grounds that ‘were there a few more like it and of the same quality, our ignorance of the Dominions would not be so deep as it is’ (‘New Novels’ 90). In what follows, I focus on the exposure of ‘social and economic inequity’ (Grant 31) that forms the basis of *Foveaux*, Tennant’s second novel and the fiction which launched her

publishing career with Gollancz in the UK (Tennant published three novels with Gollancz; after *Foveaux* and *The Battlers*, Gollancz issued the UK edition of *Ride on Stranger* in 1943. A non-fiction account of her visit to Aboriginal community missions on the Cape York Peninsula and Torres Strait Islands, *Speak You So Gently*, followed in 1959). Shifting her focus in *Foveaux* from the rural poor to the experience of the urban dweller, Tennant's portrait of poverty as drawn from her lived experience afforded global relevance to her documentary fiction despite its highly localised setting. At the same time, the author's insistence on realism drawn from observation implicates her work within the ethical quandaries of 'slumming' and 'class-passing' that similarly shadow the reception of Orwell's use of immersion as the basis for his more widely known and commented upon poverty narratives.

After the completion of *Tiburón*, writing *Foveaux* saw Tennant undertake 'an ambitious project that would address the question of what made a slum and trace the history of the inner city's descent into poverty from the beginning of the twentieth century to the Depression of the 1930s' (Grant 31–32). The novel is set within a fictional inner-city suburb of Sydney generally considered to be a composite of Surry Hills, Redfern and Woolloomooloo. The fact that Foveaux Street is one of the main thoroughfares running through Surry Hills means that the novel is today most often identified with that suburb. Tennant's interest in depicting the daily lives of a predominantly working-class population across a narrative arc that maps the drama of union strikes, municipal elections, housing shortages, eviction protests and slum clearances situates *Foveaux* as an example of the social realism that 'forms something of a dominant genre in Australian writing between the wars' (Moore 71) and of which 'women published a majority of what have become the prominent examples' (71). As in Orwell's non-fiction narratives, the issue of poverty in *Foveaux* is inseparable from the question of class. Although in *Foveaux*'s case, the polyphony of the novel form is keenly exploited by Tennant with a kaleidoscopic array of characters embodying a diversity of class perspectives. *Foveaux* is also an intrinsically place-based fiction. The dynamic interaction between the suburb's middle and lower classes, for example, is mapped spatially onto the topography of the hill upon which, as 'the downhill slide of the respectable is arrested; the Foot begins to creep upwards, engulfing the Middle in squalor. By 1936, when the book was written, *Foveaux* is all slum' (Dick 35).

In choosing to set her second novel in the inner city, Tennant was dealing with a topical and newsworthy subject matter (Mayne); the question of 'slum eradication' had received considerable attention in the Sydney press from the 1890s onwards, especially following the outbreak of bubonic plague in the Darling Harbour port area in the early 1900s (Spearritt 66). Penned a decade prior to Ruth Park's now iconic novel of life in 'Shanty Town' Surry Hills, *The Harp in the South* (1948), novelistic portrayals of Sydney's inner-city suburbs were less prevalent at the time of *Foveaux*'s composition. Documentary-based fiction derived from personal experience was becoming a 'central tradition of Australian writing' (Matthews 70). However, the setting of much of this earlier social realist fiction, like the novels of Katharine Susannah Prichard, Vance Palmer and Jean Devanny, for instance, had favoured the remote outposts of the bush, the goldfields or the canefields, rather than the city. Christina Stead's *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1934) is perhaps *Foveaux*'s most notable urban precursor although the linking of the slum with bohemia in Stead's experimental modernist fiction distinguishes it from Tennant's social realist approach. Rather, Tennant's prose is characterised by its hybridity, the sense in which 'Documentary and low-life modes—comic types, multiple characters and episodes, and picaresque structures—are mixed and reclaimed for a new kind of popular narrative' (Carter 179). In the case of *Foveaux*'s slum areas,

Tennant exploits the heightened public interest stirred by the press at that time, offering up detailed descriptions of its mean streets adapted from the data she gathered while lodging in the city but leavening it with humour. Quite often she plays with the reader's prurient desire to 'peep' into its hidden quarters such as Plug Alley where:

All the houses had at least two rooms, some three. Of course there were no baths, but anyone who wanted a bath could always rig a screen round the copper in the backyard. The bathing and sanitary facilities gave rise to the kind of crude jokes that Plug Alley most enjoyed. The inhabitants would sit on their front doorsteps in the evening and crack shameless and ribald jokes about their neighbours. Plug Alley had no secrets. (*Foveaux* 126)

A feature length profile article dedicated to Tennant, printed in the *Sydney Morning Herald Women's Supplement* in April 1939, provides valuable insights into her research methods. Sensationally titled 'Woman Author Learnt Art of Sheep-stealing: Kylie Tennant as Slum Dweller and Vagrant,' its introduction paints a colourful picture of a swashbuckling young woman with an appetite for risk and adventure:

She writes only of what she has experienced. Thus for the material of 'Foveaux,' which portrays slum life in the raw, she lived in 3/6 a week rooms among all types of people including many criminals and after a year of it became dangerously ill. But that did not deter her from a 12 weeks' buggy tour among unemployed men and women of the outback, about whom she will write in her next book. ('Woman Author' 13)

While this prominent article in a broadsheet newspaper would have afforded valuable publicity for *Foveaux* it also points to the difficult terrain that the use of lived experience forced Tennant to navigate as an author and a woman. On the one hand, Tennant is meeting the journalist's need for copy, dutifully supplying anecdotes appropriate for consumption by the newspaper supplement's female middle-class readership. Tennant also seeks to educate her audience against the stereotypes of poverty. Her hosts in Redfern acted thoughtfully, she points out, by first having her room 'newly papered with newspaper.' The family were not evil slum dwellers but 'just broke, that was all. They had one young boy in gaol, and the daughter was the most hopeless case of malnutrition' (qtd. in 'Woman Author' 13). On the other, the construction of Tennant as a courageous class-passing heroine who 'writes only of what she has experienced' is problematic in its reinforcement of an image of Tennant as a documentary reporter rather than an imaginative creative writer. It is precisely the type of reductive interpretation that reflects what Brian Matthews identifies as the broader critical neglect that has defined the response to Australian Depression-era fiction with a documentary basis. The comparison with Orwell is revealing, he argues, for '*Down and Out in Paris and London* was intelligently and admiringly reviewed in England as an important work of literature, not relegated to the second division because of its documentary base' (Matthews 72).

Even with its closely observed local content and her earlier success with *Tiburón*, Tennant struggled to find an Australian publisher for *Foveaux*. Angus & Robertson, for instance, turned it down on the basis that 'we hardly think it would sell in quantities large enough to warrant an Australian edition' (Cousins, qtd. in Grant 36). Eventually the English firm Curtis Brown agreed to act as Tennant's agents, and within six months had 'placed the novel with the left-wing publisher Victor Gollancz, who offered £40 for *Foveaux* and an option on her

next novel' (Grant 36). The contract represented a significant coup for Tennant, bringing with it a certain measure of cultural prestige. At the time, the Left Book Club 'had members throughout the world, with its strongest overseas ties in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Canada . . . New South Wales alone had 1,550 members and thirty groups' (Barrick Neavill 210). Most importantly, *Foveaux's* acceptance by Gollancz worked to overcome the tyranny of distance. Its inclusion on the list of the 'Yellow Book' publishers aligned the antipodean novel's localised content with the universal theme of poverty, thus mitigating the charge of parochial obscurity that had led other firms to treat the manuscript with caution.

In a letter to her publishers dated 28 September 1938, Tennant's relief is palpable: 'May I say how very proud I am that the firm of Gollancz for whom so many of us have great admiration in Australia has consented to publish my book' (Tennant to Horsman). The same letter also reveals that the offer was not an unqualified one. A harried exchange of correspondence between the author, her agents and Gollancz Ltd shows Tennant was instructed to remove any potentially libellous content. Orwell's *Down and Out* had been accepted by Gollancz on the condition that names would be changed to disguise recognisable figures and Tennant was similarly asked to make alterations. One cable notes that 'several of the characters (and one in particular) are painted in rather an unpleasant light' (Sheldon to Tennant). When the manuscript was read for libel by the firm's solicitors, Tennant revised it in response to various points highlighted for attention. In a return letter she makes assurances that her changes will 'keep the book as free as humanly possibly from the attention of libel seekers' (Tennant to Horsman). Unlike Orwell's reportage memoirs, Tennant's book was clearly identified as a work of fiction. On the original 1939 Gollancz jacket, *Foveaux: A Novel by Kylie Tennant* appears in bold print above a list of marketing points pitching the book as a 'novel in the richest tradition of English fiction—the novel of character.' Another bullet boasts: 'Here is a new writer who may truly be termed creative.' Still, its heavy reliance on the author's lived experience of the slum combined with Tennant's tendency to model characters on real persons from the outset complicated *Foveaux's* reception as a work of fiction.

Locally, the appearance of articles like the newspaper profile promoting Tennant as 'Slum Dweller and Vagrant' point to the sensationalism and heightened publicity that shadowed Tennant's drive to get 'outside the circle of one's own experience' during her lifetime. This popular image of Tennant's novels as being true to life worked to impede recognition of the more sophisticated ways in which 'Tennant's fiction is calculated to violate expectations of organic form' (Carter 181). Since Tennant's death in 1988, there has been a general proliferation of interdisciplinary scholarship concerned to interrogate the cultural representation of poverty in art, film and literature with a particular focus on the ethics of the participant-observer mode (Abrunhosa; Betensky; Freeman; Korte and Regard). While Tennant's fiction has not, to date, received extended discussion under this rubric, it is possible nonetheless to detect within Christopher Driver's obituary a sense of ambivalence about Tennant's use of the immersion technique when he writes:

Kylie Tennant's favourite medium was the novel. But 'medium' is the word. Her 11 novels had little to do with the individually tortured psyche, or art for art's sake; rather she helped herself gleefully to large slices of low life, Left life, travellers, dole-queues, riff-raff. Participant observation (a phrase not invented then) was her forte. (Driver 37)

The revealing expression here is ‘helped herself *gleefully*,’ bringing to mind as it does the paradoxical pleasure that ‘the experience of simulating powerlessness yields to the bourgeois subject’ emphasised by Betensky in her critique of Orwell’s class-passing (130). As for Orwell, so too the experience of vagrancy, tramping and living side-by-side with the poor proved powerfully attractive to Tennant as an antidote to the inherited prejudices of her middle-class identity (noting that Orwell’s belonging to the ‘lower-upper-middle-class’ and Eton schooling distinguishes him from Tennant’s more modest Manly private school girls’ education). The pull of the *other* is further complicated in Tennant’s case by her gender and the extent to which her research trips afforded her some release from the burden of domestic responsibilities—a temporary escape from the limitations imposed first by her role as headmaster’s wife and later by motherhood (Grant 65–67). In this way, Tennant’s desire to lose herself within the ‘disreputable’ portions of society represents a continuation of the slumming practices Seth Koven identifies as dating back to Victorian England when for women of the middle and upper classes ‘immersing themselves in the dirtiness of the slums was a literal and symbolic act of independence and adventure’ (Koven 187).

Women are almost entirely absent from Orwell’s *Down and Out*—the camaraderie that the narrator establishes with Parisian hotel workers and London tramps is exclusively masculine. In *Wigan Pier* women are present but depicted mostly as victims or background figures: ‘In such places as these a woman is only a poor drudge muddling along an infinity of jobs,’ he writes (54). Female characters occupy a more prominent position in *Foveaux* although, as in much of Tennant’s fiction, her protagonists rarely exhibit an explicitly feminist point of view. Yet the wry treatment of male-female relationships implies a sensitivity on Tennant’s part to the unevenness of gender relations, an attentiveness to the complexities of the female situation that supports Sharyn Pearce’s claim that ‘Kylie Tennant is undoubtedly the most comprehensive analyst of working-class women in Australian Depression society’ (45). In *Foveaux*, the sexuality of working-class women is a key preoccupation explored through the slum setting which operates as a zone of affective intensity, an unruly place where bodies collide through proximity and a lack of privacy, and the poor are identified as less inhibited than their middle-class counterparts.

At times, this is expressed comically as in the views of the local Child Welfare Inspector—responsible for resolving the suburb’s many paternal ‘affiliation’ cases—who remarks on the promiscuous birdlife of Foveaux Park: ‘Even the pigeons there had loose morals. In other parks pigeons might live in sedate domesticity, pair by pair, but in Foveaux Park they were indiscriminate in their love, and casual in their lives’ (*Foveaux* 135). The use of humour is inherently destabilising as the target of Tennant’s jest runs in multiple directions—at once mocking the prejudices of the ‘constantly prying’ (*Foveaux* 363) authorities who regulate the lives of the poor and those of the middle-class reader, too, who might endorse such analogies. At the same time, it is impossible to dismiss the odd mix of apprehension and voyeuristic interest in the sensuality of slum life that runs throughout *Foveaux*, an unconscious product, perhaps, of the natural prudishness that Tennant found difficult to fully shake in her fiction (Grant).

Just as the first-hand observation of working-class poverty laid out in *The Road to Wigan Pier* fails to generate revolutionary fervour in Orwell, *Foveaux* also exhibits a similar political fatalism. The novel concludes with an air of defeat, as expressed in the sentiments of long-time Foveaux resident, Bramley Cornish, for whom: ‘The terrible resignation of the poor like the resignation of the dying hurt more than anything else’ (*Foveaux* 392). In a distinct departure from Orwell, however, Tennant maps a pattern of sexism as forming an integral

feature of the political environment of both the Left and conservative groups at that time. Again, the polyphonous form of the novel affords Tennant the chance to present a diverse range of gendered class perspectives, producing what David Carter has termed (writing of Alan Marshall's fiction) a 'multiplication of types' whereby characters 'no longer represent mere subjectivity, but are sites where social forces and ideologies play out their effects' (171). The jostling pluralism of *Foveaux* contrasts starkly with Orwell's non-fiction accounts told from the viewpoint of a single narrator although, as Raymond Williams emphasises, this narrator should not be directly equated with Orwell himself but represents, rather, the constructed narrative persona of an 'outside-observer' (Williams 50).

Tennant's novel is expansive and indiscriminating in its withering satire aimed at those motivated to seek power and influence. It is equally concerned to expose the hypocrisy of the local conservative councillor, so-called 'Honest John' Hutchison, for example, whose benign public image belies his ill-treatment of his wife and daughters at home, as it is to lay bare the sexism of the suburb's left-wing leader, Jock Jamieson. Organiser of the Foveaux branch of the Communist Party, Jock outwardly espouses radical inclusivity whilst inwardly resenting the growing participation of women: 'One woman more or less made little difference as far as he could see; but it was his duty to draw everybody into the revolutionary movement, however much he might disapprove of them' (*Foveaux* 227). Similar sentiments exist even in Orwell's work, as in the 'Hop Picking Diary' when he writes: 'It is not much use to try and form a union, though, for about half the pickers are women and gypsies, and are too stupid to see the advantages of it' (34). While some critics have acknowledged how 'Orwell's conventional attitudes toward gender and his uninterest in, even condescension toward, women's rights issues,' represent 'a notable deficiency in his work' (Rodden 217), comparisons with novels such as *Foveaux* illuminate how sweeping categories like 'the poor' and 'the oppressed' in his work often conceal significant biases that require greater nuancing in respect of gender, race and geography.

The reissue in late 2020 of *Orwell and the Dispossessed*, a Penguin Classics collection of Orwell's key writings based on his living among the destitute and poor—including *Down and Out in Paris and London*—is indicative of the centrality of poverty to contemporary interest in Orwell's work. Kylie Tennant's novels, by contrast, are now largely out of print among the major publishers in Australia. At the time of writing, it is possible to obtain new copies of *Foveaux*, *Tiburou*, *The Battlers* and *Time Enough Later* as print-on-demand titles from the boutique South Australian publisher, Michael Walmer. The impact of this lack of access to the texts themselves is compounded by the critical neglect afforded to Tennant's social realist fiction which has not benefitted from the growth in scholarly research on Australian women writers that was ignited in the 1980s by studies like Drusilla Modjeska's *Exiles at Home* and further bolstered by the focus in recent decades on expatriate modernist women and transnational literatures. By considering the little-studied *Foveaux* alongside Orwell's more widely known poverty narratives of the 1930s, this essay has sought to establish the extent to which Tennant's representation of poverty as drawn from her own lived experience has both historical and literary relevance beyond locally focused readings of the work.

Publication by Victor Gollancz represented an important circuit-breaker for Tennant, allowing for an antipodean city novel deeply rooted in the locality of Sydney to be appreciated in the context of global political concerns. While Orwell's *Down and Out* also attracted the interest of Gollancz as an important record of poverty warranting public attention, it is salient to recognise that the 'genres of documentary developed in the 1930s were not simply modes of recording contemporary experience. Style and subject-matter were politically motivated as

writers attempted to represent forcefully, in literary discourse, facts and attitudes which they believed literature had conventionally excluded or falsified' (Carter 169). For Orwell and Tennant, immersion among the poor proved one of the chief means through which the two authors, like others at the time, sought to incorporate the experience of the marginalised within their writing. In both cases, the identification with an impoverished *other* also served powerful professional and personal needs such that any recognition of their pioneering efforts in giving literary voice to the poor warrants a commensurate acknowledgement and critical attention to the limits of their empathy.

WORKS CITED

- Abrunhosa, Marina Remy. "The Amateur Casuals": Immersion among the Poor from James Greenwood to George Orwell.' *Narrating Poverty and Precarity in Britain*. Eds. Barbara Korte and Frédéric Regard. Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 2014. 93–110.
- Amundsen, Michael. 'George Orwell's Ethnographies of Experience: *The Road to Wigan Pier* and *Down and Out in Paris and London*.' *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* 25.1 (2016): 9–25.
- Attard, Karen. 'Nomadology in Kylie Tennant's *The Battlers*' *ASAL Proceedings of the Nineteenth Annual Conference* (September 1997): 94–98.
- Barrick Neavill, Gordon. 'Victor Gollancz and the Left Book Club.' *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 41.3 (July 1971): 197–215.
- Barrowman, Rachel. *A Popular Vision: The Arts and the Left in New Zealand 1930–1950*. Wellington: Victoria UP, 1991.
- Beadle, Gordon B. 'George Orwell's Literary Studies of Poverty in England.' *Twentieth Century Literature* 24.2 (Summer 1978): 188–201.
- Betensky, Carolyn. 'Princes as Paupers: Pleasure and the Imagination of Powerlessness.' *Cultural Critique* 56 (Winter 2004): 129–57.
- Carter, David. *Always Almost Modern: Australian Print Cultures and Modernity*. North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2013.
- Clarke, Peter. 'Introduction.' *George Orwell: Orwell and the Dispossessed*. Ed. Peter Davison. London: Penguin Classics. 2020. IX–XV.
- Cousins, W.G. Letter to Kylie Tennant. Quoted in *Kylie Tennant: A Life*, by Jane Grant. Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2006.
- Davison, Peter. 'From Burma to Paris.' *Orwell and the Dispossessed*. Ed. Peter Davison. London: Penguin Classics. 2020. 5–6
- Dick, Margaret. *The Novels of Kylie Tennant*. Adelaide: Rigby, 1966.
- Driver, Christopher. 'Tough Champion of Sydney's Street Life.' Obituary: Kylie Tennant. *The Guardian* (5 March 1988); ProQuest Historical Newspapers: *The Guardian and The Observer*. 37.
- Dudley Edwards, Ruth. *Victor Gollancz: A Biography*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1987.
- Freeman, Mark. "Journeys into Poverty Kingdom": Complete Participation and the British Vagrant, 1866–1914.' *History Workshop Journal* (Autumn 2001): 99–121.
- Gollancz, Victor. 'Foreword.' *The Road to Wigan Pier* by George Orwell. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1958. XI–XXIV.
<https://archive.org/details/roadtowiganpie00orwe/page/n13/mode/2up>
- Grant, Jane. *Kylie Tennant: A Life*. Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2006.
- Hodges, Sheila. *Gollancz: The Story of a Publishing House, 1928–1978*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1978.
- Ingle, Stephen. *Orwell Reconsidered*. London; New York: Routledge, 2020.

- Korte, Barbara and Frédéric Regard, ed. *Narrating Poverty and Precarity in Britain*. Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 2014.
- Koven, Seth. *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London*. Princeton; Oxford: Princeton UP, 2004.
- Kumar, Krishan. 'Versions of the Pastoral: Poverty and the Poor in English Fiction from the 1840s to the 1950s.' *Journal of Historical Sociology* 8.1 (1995): 1–35.
- Marks, Peter. 'Reputations: George Orwell.' *The Political Quarterly* 70.1 (1999): 83–90.
- Matthews, Brian. "'A Kind of Semi-Sociological Literary Criticism": George Orwell, Kylie Tennant and Others.' *Westerly* 2 (June 1981): 65–72.
- Mayne, Alan. 'Representing the Slum.' *Urban History Yearbook* 17 (1990): 66–84.
- Meyers, Valerie. *George Orwell*. London: Macmillan, 1991.
- Modjeska, Drusilla. *Exiles at Home: Australian Women Writers 1925–1945*. Sydney South: HarperCollins Australia, 2014.
- Moore, Nicole. 'The Politics of Cliché: Sex, Class, and Abortion in Australian Realism.' *Modern Fiction Studies* 41.1 (Spring 2001): 69–91.
- Murphy, Dervla. 'Introduction.' *Down and Out in Paris and London* by George Orwell. London: Penguin Classics, 2001. V–XV.
- Orwell, George. *Burmese Days*. London: Penguin Books, 2014.
- . *Down and Out in Paris and London*. London: Penguin Classics, 2001.
- . 'Hop-Picking Diary.' *George Orwell: Orwell and the Dispossessed*. Ed. Peter Davison. London: Penguin Classics. 2020. 23–44.
- . 'Inside the Whale.' *George Orwell: Essays*. London: Penguin Classics, 2000. 101–33.
- . 'Introduction to the French edition of *Down and Out in Paris and London*.' 15 October 1934. Reprinted in *Orwell and the Dispossessed*. Ed. Peter Davison. London: Penguin Classics, 2020. 221–22.
- . Letter to Victor Gollancz. 9 May 1937. The Orwell Foundation. Accessed 25 June 2020. <https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/george-orwell-to-victor-gollancz-9-may-1937/>
- . 'New Novels: *The Beauty of the Dead* by H.E. Bates Cape; *Welsh Short Stories* by Glyn Jones; *The Parents Left Alone* by T.O. Beachcroft; and *The Battlers* by Kylie Tennant.' *The New Statesman and Nation* (25 January 1941): 89–90.
- . *The Road to Wigan Pier*. London: Penguin Classics, 2001.
- Park, Ruth. *The Harp in the South*. Melbourne: Penguin Books, 2009.
- Pearce, Sharyn. 'Changing Places: Working-Class Women in the Fiction of the Depression.' *Westerly* 31.4, (December 1986): 41–51.
- Rodden, John. *The Politics of Literary Reputation: The Making and Claiming of 'St. George' Orwell*. New York; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989.
- Sabin, Margery. 'The Truths of Experience: Orwell's Nonfiction of the 1930s.' *The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell*. Ed. John Rodden. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007. 43–58.
- Shannon, Phil. 'Sympathy with the Working Poor.' *Green Left* 166, 15 February 2007. Accessed 23 July 2020. <https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/sympathy-working-poor>
- Sheldon, Constance. Letter to Kylie Tennant. 27 May 1938. Collection of the National Library of Australia. MS 10043 Papers of Kylie Tennant / Series 1. Business correspondence, c. 1936–1964 / File 35 (Box 5).
- Spearritt, Peter. 'Sydney's "Slums": Middle Class Reformers and the Labor Response.' *Labour History* 26 (May 1974): 65–81.
- Stead, Christina. *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*. Carlton: Miegunyah P, 2015.
- Tennant, Kylie. *Foveaux*. Adelaide: Michael Walmer, 2014.

- . Letter to Dorothy Horsman. 28 September 1938. Collection of the National Library of Australia. MS 10043 Papers of Kylie Tennant / Series 1. Business correspondence, c. 1936–1964 / File 35 (Box 5).
- . *Speak You So Gently*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1959.
- . *Tell Morning This*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1967.
- . *The Battlers*. Sydney: Harper Collins, 2013.
- . *Tiburón*. Adelaide: Michael Walmer, 2013.
- Watson, George. 'Facing Unpleasant Facts: George Orwell's Reports.' *The Sewanee Review* 96.4 (Fall 1988): 644–57.
- Williams, Raymond. *George Orwell*. New York: Columbia UP, 1971.
- 'Woman Author Learnt Art of Sheep-Stealing. Kylie Tennant as Slum Dweller and Vagrant.' *The Sydney Morning Herald Women's Supplement* (24 April 1939): 13.