

From Colony to Transnation: Introduction

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This special issue of *JASAL* is a collection of essays based on papers delivered at the ASAL conference ‘From Colony to Transnation,’ held at the University of Sydney on 5–6 December 2019, to mark the retirement of the Chair of Australian Literature, Professor Robert Dixon. In all, thirty-nine papers were given, including keynotes by David Carter and Jeanette Hoorn, and the conference also incorporated the Herbert Blaiklock Memorial Lecture, delivered by the writer Nicolas Rothwell.

Robert Dixon’s career has constituted a kind of circumnavigation of Australia by way of some of its tertiary institutions, beginning with his studies at the University of Sydney, and continuing on to employment at Newcastle University, the Western Australian Institute of Technology (Curtin University), James Cook University, the University of Southern Queensland, the University of Queensland, and finally back to Sydney, where he became the fourth Professor of Australian Literature. His research output is similarly wide-ranging and diverse, with a significant temporal span as indicated in the conference theme, ‘From Colony to Transnation.’ His books alone traverse colonial neo-classicism in *The Course of Empire* (1986), nineteenth-century popular fiction in *Writing the Colonial Adventure* (1995), Australian cultural engagements with Papua New Guinea in *Prosthetic Gods* (2001), Frank Hurley’s early multimedia spectacles in *Photography, Early Cinema and Colonial Modernity* (2011), and contemporary literary fiction in *Alex Miller: The Ruin of Time* (2014). As this list might suggest, Robert’s work has continuously engaged with transformative shifts within the discipline—with paradigms such as poststructuralism, new historicism, postcolonial theory, and cultural studies—and he has been at the forefront of new areas in the field, including the impact on Australian literary studies of the digital humanities and the new empiricism, new modernist studies, and world literature and transnational literary studies.

His serious visage and steely eye notwithstanding, Robert is a generous, much loved colleague, sought out and warmly appreciated by colleagues at all stages of their careers. He is especially well known for his capabilities and insights as a research mentor. As well as producing the above monographs, Robert has been at the centre of field dialogue for a considerable time, instigating research and collaboration through numerous conferences, symposia and edited collections. His outstanding achievements and his acumen in research have benefitted his colleagues and students around Australia and internationally, suggesting that his legacy will continue to be significant. As many who have had occasion to work or converse with Robert know, he can also be droll: a sharp and witty observer of the ironies and foibles attending campus and professional life more generally.

Given Robert’s longstanding collegial connection with the Association for the Study of Australian Literature, including as one of its past Presidents, it seems especially fitting that ASAL’s own journal, *JASAL*, should be the home for the essays arising from the conference in his honour. This special issue offers abundant evidence of the breadth of contemporary Australian literary studies and, since all essays connect either directly or indirectly with his research, pays tribute to Robert’s role as a leading figure. Mirroring Robert’s body of work, these essays collectively traverse topics in early colonial culture and late imperial romance,

vernacular modernism, histories of the book, postcolonial and transnational literary studies, and contemporary author studies.

In the collection's lead essay, developed from his conference keynote address, David Carter reflects on the previously unstudied impact of Australian Indigenous writing in the American market. Based on empirical research into the numbers of titles held in US libraries, Carter finds that—despite relative successes like Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1990 US edition), Doris Pilkington Garimara's *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002 US edition) and more recent works by Kim Scott and Alexis Wright—the field remains 'small-scale and dispersed,' yet with lessons for the future of Australian literature in the wake of Indigenous transnationalism.

Elizabeth McMahon's essay returns us to Robert's book, *Writing the Colonial Adventure*, in which, drawing on Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986), the grotesque is applied to scenes of transvestism in Australian colonial fiction. McMahon elucidates the doubled, paradoxical order of the grotesque, and the associated play of surfaces (of dress, skin, and the gaze) in such fictional works as Joseph Furphy's *Such is Life* (1903) and Rosa Praed's *Fugitive Anne* (1903). Noting misrecognitions that implicate both gazer and reader, McMahon shows how these transvestite figures contribute to the formation of the collective colonial subject through both its fantasies about, and its expulsion of, its others.

Several essays respond to other aspects of Robert's work on imperial and colonial narratives of adventure and exploration. In 'Cook, Conrad and the Poetics of Error,' Brendan Casey unpacks the 'complex intent' behind Joseph Conrad's 1888 retracing of Captain Cook's 1770 journey up the east coast of Australia to the Torres Strait. Chief among errors in Conrad's account of this journey in his later writing is his curious elision of Cook's act of claiming possession for the British crown on Bedanug, or Possession Island: an omission that served psychologically to distance the explorer from the violence of imperial history and maintain Conrad's nostalgic desire for a form of what Paul Carter has called spatial history; what Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* (1899) would, with evident irony, call 'the glories of exploration.'

John Scheckter revisits Douglas Mawson's best-selling account of the Australian Antarctic Expedition of 1911 to 1914, *The Home of the Blizzard* (1915), discerning its modernising and nationalising impulses. For Scheckter, Mawson's book is less concerned with heroic exploits than with the collection and dissemination of scientific data, objectives calculated to enhance the 'production of a modern Australia.' Scheckter's reading suggests that Mawson believed in a 'utopian future' in which Australia's interaction with Antarctica would 'improve the home society and legitimate the nation.'

Australian popular cultural and vernacular modernities are in focus in four essays that separately evoke such works as *The Impact of the Modern* (2008), jointly edited by Robert Dixon and Veronica Kelly, and Robert's monograph *Photography, Early Cinema and Colonial Modernity: Frank Hurley's Synchronised Lecture Entertainments*. Veronica Kelly's essay on British live variety entertainer Tommy Trinder identifies him as both an exemplum of, and instrumental within, British-Australian transnational traffic in the mid-century and early postwar years. Mapping Trinder's 'ubiquitous' comedic performances in Australia against widely discrepant—'hetero-temporal'—scenes in remote Australia of British military and scientific endeavour and nuclear testing, Kelly shows how Trinder tacitly advanced official Anglo-Australian interests using the 'arts of soft power.' This forms a rich context for reviewing

Trinder's role in the Ealing Studio film *Bitter Springs* (1950), which drew for its cast from the Tjatjara people of the Maralinga region.

Anita Callaway's essay on Felix the Cat restores Felix's larrikin Australian origins to a once global phenomenon, finding in them an energy 'that invigorated American modernism with transnational infusions.' Australia's contribution to metropolitan modernity might thus be best judged in terms of its impact on popular culture, 'a counter-colonial conspiracy' that facilitated the 'convergence' of avant-garde and kitsch in the original Felix cartoons. In comparison to Pat Sullivan's carnivalesque, self-fragmenting feline, his bland usurper Mickey Mouse looks downright provincial.

The career of the once bestselling novelist Dale Collins is recalled in Victoria Kuttainen's essay, which shows how his international fame during the interwar period was linked to new media technologies and the rising cult of the celebrity. In both his life and works Collins became, in fact, a multi-media personality, with his novels celebrated and abridged in glossy magazines, and adapted for stage and screen. Postwar changes in commercial entertainment, and in the politics of cultural value, however, meant that he died in obscurity in 1956. Yet here was a writer whose 'send-ups of modernity' bear comparison to those of Anita Loos, Evelyn Waugh, Noël Coward and Sinclair Lewis.

Robert's work on Frank Hurley informs Ann Maxwell's essay which documents techniques and conventions in both amateur and professional Australian photography, highlighting its transnational traffic. The essay centres on two key 'moments' that suggest the formative, two-way nature of this traffic: the first being studio portraiture from the 1860s to 1880s, and the second being 'Pictorialism' in landscape photography from 1925 to 1945. If nineteenth-century Australian photography 'was primarily about obtaining a likeness of the objects photographed' (including objectifying and ethnographically-oriented photographs of Indigenous people), twentieth-century 'Pictorialism' in landscape photography facilitated emerging emphases on everyday tourism, leisure and artistic self-expression.

Robert's recent work on the relation of Australian literature to world literature is the touchstone for several essays engaged, albeit in different ways, with the loosening or disruption of nation and with pursuit of transnational perspectives on Australian writing. In his essay, Bill Ashcroft draws on notable cultural theories of urban space to think about the 'transnation' (as distinct from the 'transnational') as a capacious collective glimpsed in the movement of everyday citizens that never precisely conforms to state-sanctioned border-management regimes. Invoking Michael Gardiner's 'everyday utopianism' together with Ernest Bloch's sense of *heimat* as dwelling in unbelonging, Ashcroft folds literary writing in Australia into the transnation, since such writing usually runs athwart official national discourses of belonging.

Taking a cue from Robert's 2007 essay 'Australian Literature—International Contexts,' Natalie Edwards and Christopher Hogarth reveal examples of texts written in and about Australia that can nonetheless be considered 'as part of a Global French Literature.' Together with more recent travel-writing about Australia, these include the works of Paul Wenz, who settled here and was active in the local literary scene in the early twentieth century, and those of nineteenth-century visitors like Antoine Fauchery, whose 1857 *Lettres d'un mineur en Australie* was issued by Baudelaire's publisher. Coming out of a larger ARC-funded project on French migrant narratives about Australia, Edwards and Hogarth's essay suggests fresh ways of understanding both French and Australian identities.

In synchrony with some of Ashcroft's observations, Stéphane Cordier's essay explores questions of settler belonging—or rather 'unbelonging'—at the heart of Nicolas Rothwell's non-fictional writings. Except for Robert's 2011 essay ('Ground Zero: Nicolas Rothwell's Natural History of Destruction'), Rothwell's writing is yet to receive concerted attention from scholars of Australian literature. Cordier's essay addresses the gap by investigating Rothwell's use of the narrative essay as 'a rhizomic form of writing that accommodates self-reflexivity, polyphony' and that ultimately prompts 'reflection on the ethics of representation.' Cordier shows how Rothwell, mindful of Indigenous 'Country,' works both with and against European-derived aesthetics of the self in its relation to place and landscape.

Also concerned with belonging, Lyn McCredden's essay searches out 'synergies or dialogue between the fields of secular and sacred' in contemporary Australian life, and finds poetry as a key site in which this is taking place through readings of works by Bruce Dawe, Les Murray, Lionel Fogarty and Judith Beveridge, as well as through consideration of the poetics of the 2017 Indigenous document, 'Uluru: Statement from the Heart.' In its urgent enfolding of the political with the spiritual, Indigenous poetry, especially, offers 'transformative potential' for a wider understanding of sacred belonging.

Robert's discussions of individual authors and their works are explicitly taken up in essays that also engage with scenes of reading from the perspective of writers who may perhaps be considered as both insiders and outsiders to 'Australian literature.' Brigitta Olubas examines Shirley Hazzard's self-fashioning as literary amateur, reflecting on the trace of provincial origins amid her cultivation of erudite cosmopolitanism. Dialoguing with Robert's 2010 essay ("Turning a Place into a Field": Shirley Hazzard's *The Great Fire* and Cold War Area Studies'), Olubas identifies Hazzard's interest in and sources of knowledge about Japan, Hong Kong and mainland China, notably through works by French 'Sinophile' Victor Segalen and her friendship with two American scholars of Japanese literature, Ivan Morris and Donald Keene. For Olubas, Hazzard's 'expatriation' is less salient than her 'habitus of disconnection' from professional academic and institutional circuits: she drew her understanding of the postwar world from connections she made through reading and correspondence, through literature and literary networks.

Nicolas Birns's essay engages with Alex Miller's fiction 'in the spirit' of Robert's critical work on the author, and considers the meaning of the autobiographical understorey of Miller's most recent novel, *The Passage of Love* (2015) as an example of what Serge Doubrovsky has called *autofiction*, a variation of the *roman à clef* with implications for Miller's earlier work and Australian writing more generally. Birns writes that 'Miller's oeuvre . . . plumbs the paradoxes of Australia's relation to Europe,' and shows how, through his 'delicate use of autofiction,' the narrator of *The Passage of Love* recognises 'that he is implicated in the interaction of settler colonialism and modernity.'

The international success of US-based novelist Geraldine Brooks has not been matched by critical attention in her home country, and Anne Pender seeks to find out why. Pender's essay reflects on some of the difficulties faced by expatriate authors and, in Brooks's case, her interest in historical fiction not set in Australia may be a factor. Her 2005 novel *March*, set during the American Civil War, and freely based on Louisa May Alcott's classic *Little Women* (1868), offers a case in point; but, coming out of the writer's own experience as a war correspondent in the Middle East, Africa and the Balkans, there is clearly more to be said about its transnational scope and significance.

The concluding essay in this issue, by Gillian Whitlock, gathering together Robert's works on Australia in the Pacific region, takes its ethical bearings from his 2002 essay, 'Citizens and Asylum Seekers: Emotional Literacy, Rhetorical Leadership and Human Rights.' Whitlock investigates the making, reception and aesthetic—indeed the poetics—of *Chauka: Please Tell Us the Time*, directed by Behrouz Bouchani with Arash Sarvestani. *Chauka* documents and bears witness to the suffering of detainees on Manus Island, refugees caught up in the Australian Government's border-control strategy of offshoring those arriving in its waters by boat. For Whitlock, *Chauka* instantiates a Pacific theatre of documentary made of multiple refugee imaginaries. Whitlock registers the impact of this punitive regime on both detainees and the Manusian people, and includes later reflections by Behrouz Bouchani himself on the inevitable limitations of the film—the difficulty it presented of creating an 'appropriate interpretive space' so spectators might, as Whitlock puts it, 'grasp the depths of Australia's colonial imaginary and its control of borders and bodies in the region.'