

Steady Optimism: A Response to Philip Mead

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I am honored to be able to respond to Philip Mead's comprehensive and, in general, heartening survey of the field of Australian literary studies today. Not the least due to Mead's energy, generosity, and lineation in multiple networks, the field seems to be in better shape than might have been predicted.

Despite shocks such as (in 2019) Robert Dixon's chair at the University of Sydney not being passed on to a new generation, Mead shows that there is a strong degree of institutional support for Australian literary studies today. Moreover, Mead further points out that many international firms are publishing books of Australian literature, and that, despite there not being a huge number of jobs worldwide specifically devoted to teaching Australian literature, production of journal articles on Australian literature continues apace, with many new names publishing provocative and compelling work. Admittedly, the quantity is not as large as we would wish, but the positive developments are there. I would add that the current generation of early career researchers in the field is very strong. In coediting *The Cambridge Companion to the Australian Novel* with Louis Klee (himself an early career scholar), I was impressed by how many of our chapters were written by strong early career researchers, and how many early-career people we had as contributors, relative to other Cambridge Companions. In attending various conferences held by the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL) and the American Association of Australasian Literary Studies (AAALS), I have been impressed not just by the percipience and freshness of these beginning scholars but by the depth of their command of the highly heterogeneous collection of texts that can be said to make up Australian literature. There are also very lively spaces for rigorous discussion of Australian literature on social media and in online publications such as the *Sydney Review of Books*. Long-established journals such as *Australian Literary Studies* and *Antipodes* have been galvanised by new editorships and are traversing new ground while continuing with the high standards of past decades. Despite the lamentable continuing erosion of newspaper book sections in Australia, the *Australian Book Review* continues to be a vital and sustainable organ. The generation of scholars new or recently entering Australian literary studies is well positioned to withstand the inevitable and admittedly wearying obstacles—the dearth of jobs, the ingrained Australian tendency to underrate the importance of the country's literature, the perceived crisis of the humanities in general—that unfortunately, but not immovably, stand in their way. Australian–Asian literary connections, once mere wishful thinking, have become vibrant, multiple, and ideologically unpredictable. Without minimising all that is wrong in the current situation, there is a considerable amount that is right. The level of persistent institutional presence Mead sketches will be crucial in continuing to make this possible. Mead's optimism is not only refreshing but based on discernible, if unobtrusive, realities.

Mead quotes the publisher Michael Heyward who laments two specific problems in Australian literary studies pedagogy—the absence of studies of Christina Stead and Patrick White. These strike me as two separate problems. Stead is a writer who was regarded as marginal in her lifetime but who has been constantly revived, usually in an effort centering on *The Man Who Loved*

Children and conducted more or less in the terms of Randall Jarrell's seminal 1965 essay on Stead. I taught *The Man Who Loved Children* in 2021 to a group of mature-age students and was surprised by how few of them had heard of it, given how convinced people were that Jonathan Franzen's 2010 essay on the novel in the *New York Times* would irretrievably put the book on the map, and given that the New York-based demographic I was teaching was precisely the demographic most likely to have encountered pieces such as Franzen's. Just eleven years later, the article, and all the publicity it generated for Stead, might as well never have been written. This indicates that we perhaps got two things wrong. Franzen's essay, instead of being sniped at by Australianists (including, admittedly, myself) should have been unequivocally welcomed; in a world where literary reading is something marginal and precarious, any foregrounding of it should be praised. Secondly, one article in a New York newspaper, one "event" as F. R. Leavis called it in the "history of publicity" (Leavis 73), no matter how spectacular it might seem, does not create a literary field. A novel as complex and deep as *The Man Who Loved Children* needs to be sustained by persistent teaching in a granular, specific, variegated way beyond the publicised literary event, however welcome a window on literary value such an event might provide. Only teachers—however beleaguered, displaced, disregarded, marginal, precarious they might be—can accomplish this.

White is a different case, as winning the Nobel Prize when he was sixty-one meant that he was widely recognised in his lifetime. Sadly, White's reputation has curiously lagged ever since his death. Despite recent analyses of White by Elizabeth McMahon and Shaun Bell in terms of gender and sexuality, the current consensus still seems to regard White as somewhat dated. Part of the problem here is that, unlike Stead's work, the consensus has not settled on one novel by which to define White. *Voss* seems so almost parodically settler-colonialist, despite its implied critique of settler colonialism, as to be not a good candidate; Voss himself seems in today's light more like a right-wing incel than a Promethean, tragic founder. I did teach *The Tree of Man* successfully in China in the 2010s, but teaching an Australian novel to non-Australians is very different than teaching it within the Australian national space. Mead states that Australian universities not teaching Henry Handel Richardson is equivalent to not teaching Flaubert in France or Tolstoy in Russia, but Richardson, as a presence in the archive, cannot really be compared to Tolstoy and Flaubert—not because she is inferior to them but because, as an Australian, she was not globally visible the way a French or Russian writer would have assumed as their prerogative. I would note also that both Flaubert and Tolstoy were disliked by many people in their places and times because they challenged norms of propriety and state power.

This takes us to the larger issue that one of the real problems in Australian literary studies is that there has never really been an Australian literary canon. The fact that, in the past few generations, metropolitan canons have been pluralised and even shattered by critiques of white male hegemony has meant that having a definitive canon is out of fashion. But Australian literary studies is well equipped to curate a canon for tactical reasons—in full awareness of the provisionality and arbitrariness of the very idea of canons—simply for coherence, to get teachers and students more or less on the same page and build a consensus which can then be critiqued and ramified. Notably, this has been achieved in the case of Indigenous Australian literature, where it would be hard to teach this subject without including Alexis Wright and Kim Scott. The situations are of course highly different, but a field-wide agreement on some sort of canon could redress the unfortunate gaps that Mead describes. When recent novels from other nations are successful in the Global North, they have at their back some sort of perceived canon, a factor lacking in Australian literature, perhaps even more so than in Canadian literature. In such a canon, it may be that White and Stead, at least temporarily, do not, for all their merits, have a place; but once a canon is defined,

internal revaluations can occur and these two would, in my opinion, survive any winnowing of valuation regarding pedagogy, taxonomy, and reading. Without some sort of canon, Australian literature will only be as visible as the big event—the international prize, the book review in an American periodical, the attention-generating hoax, the sudden flare of controversy in some polemical fracas—that has provided publicity ad hoc to Australian literature but has not left the sphere of Australian literary studies operating on a sustainable, renewable basis.

Mead devotes the final portion of his essay to discussions of the role of the national in light of the local and the global. Mead uses the term “globalism” where others might say “globalisation.” The usages may be different in Australia, but as an American, I would say “globalism” suggests an interventionist foreign policy in the service of a constituted global order, as in the title of Stephen Ambrose and Douglas Brinkley’s 1997 book, *Rise to Globalism*. Thus, for understandable reasons, the term has not been much embraced by the Left here; it is associated much more with “establishment” foreign policy and corporate economic interests. “Globalisation,” however, despite being used by neoliberal proponents of a global free market, has also been adopted by advocates of a more pluralistic, decolonised, anti-hegemonic, and multiracial world. Whatever term one uses, the global has just as much of a valence as the national and the local, and it is hard to see it simply as an antidote to the limitations of the national. Mead asserts that, concerning climate change, it is the local and the global, not, implicitly, the national, that can produce truly challenging and renovating models of insight. I understand what he means here and certainly, the critical work of Tony Hughes d’Aeth and the poetic work of John Kinsella in the Wheatbelt of Western Australia is just the sort of witness to, and questioning of a specifically local landscape in peril that can raise the level of environmental urgency. But climate change cannot be addressed on a global level without the machinery of the nations: crucial measures such as the 2016 Paris Agreement had to be signed by nations.

Yet one has to concede that to discuss the national, and national literatures, today is to enter a highly problematic and uncertain field. Mead points out that the relation of Australian literature to national space is much more changeable and heterogeneous than other national literatures with a fairly fixed canon and associations with cultural prestige, heritage, and patrimony. This is undeniably true and is one of the factors in the heterogeneity and malleability of the Australian literary field discussed above. In addition, certainly, Australia, as a national idea, is the result of colonial violence and the arbitrary and unjustified usurpation of the lands of Indigenous peoples. But, if one compares Australian literature to the four national literatures that I would argue have been most influential on it—those of the USA, England, France (as seen in Mead’s magnificent 2014 review essay, “Proust at Caloundra”), and Russia—there is a rough equivalence in the problematic nature of national spaces. The United States was formed by a very similar sort of colonial violence, with the additional stain of chattel slavery and multiple matrices of oppression and structural racism. Cities such as Mariupol and Melitopol which Russia today wrongly claims as primevally Russian were settled after Captain Cook’s 1770 *Endeavour* voyage and were the result of Russian usurpations of the lands of Turkic and Muslim peoples who had lived there for centuries. England, as a polity, was the result of a much earlier wave of settler colonialism than that practised by English-speaking people in Australia, as the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes usurped the Celts who were already living in Britain. France, as a polity is the product of ruthless centralisation and suppression of linguistic minorities such as the Provençal, Gascon, and Celtic-speaking Breton peoples. Since Mead cites the work of the acclaimed medievalist David Wallace, it is worth noting that, even though the national violence of England and France began earlier than that of the United States, Russia, or Australia, national violence is at the ground of these literary

traditions. The title of Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's book about the role of violence in US identity, *The Violent Empire*, could as well apply to any of the other nations mentioned in this paragraph. Just because those national identities are enshrined and fossilised as layers of cultural heritage does not mean that their origins are not as contingent, conjectural, and problematic as is that of settler Australian culture.

The nation, as an idea, is associated almost inherently with usurpation and violence. Australia is an example of this, but not the only one. It is for this reason, as well as what Mead reveals as the excessive presence of nationalism in the founding generations of Australianist literary critics, that national frameworks must be deployed very delicately and self-consciously in Australian literary studies. Mead cites currently popular phrases as part of "globalism," such as "global antiquity" or "the global Middle Ages." I do not see these phrases as a manifestation of "globalism" as an ideology but as a simple and overdue recognition of the fact of the global. For instance, in antiquity, not only can the early civilisations of the Nile, Indus, Tigris-Euphrates, and the Huang-He/Yangtze River valleys be compared with each other, but in twentieth-century world histories, even those written from a fairly Eurocentric point of view, they always were. It simply was that Eurocentric literary studies in the twentieth century tended to silo Europe away from Asia and Africa for racist reasons. This is now being redressed. The continuity of cultural ideas and of demographic migration between Europe, Asia, and Africa has been recognised, as well as the recognition of the antiquity of the Indigenous traditions of the Americas. The idea of global antiquity has particular relevance concerning Australia, because when it is recognised that Indigenous people were in what is now called Australia during the entire course of these other early global cultures, we gain a felt and tangible sense of the sheer duration of the presence of the First Nations on the land. Australian literature is a part of world literature, and though demographically in terms of visibility it is a minor part, in the ecology of world literature it is a very important part, and becoming more important by the day, thanks and no small part to the institutional resilience that Mead traces in the first part of his presentation.

Yet the idea of critical regionalism, and Kinsella's idea of international regionalism, presumes the region as a fairly geographically extensive and culturally coherent area: in other words, an area that in contour is not unlike the nation, but on a smaller scale. The MOOC that Mead taught in 2015, "Australian Literature: A Rough Guide," is impressive and exhilarating precisely in foregrounding a sense of place and transmitting that sense of place to global participants who might not have visited, and might never visit in an empirical sense. But the places illustrated, and in general the regions emphasised by critical regionalism, are viable sub-entities even if they are not nations. Certainly, some nations are no larger in size, population, or both than the West Australian wheatbelt. These are internationally recognised nations with recognition in world forums. They might be considered microstates, but states they certainly are. In turn, there are more granular ideas of place than "the region." Cities and suburbs, for instance, have very different ideas of place than most of the sites that Mead explored in the 2015 MOOC which are largely rural. In the Australian context any discussion of regionalism has to be put in the context that the demographic majority of human beings live in the southeastern quadrant of the Australian continent. Moreover, there can be regions of class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and affect that can coexist within the spatial contours of any place, but especially a densely populated one.

It is an inherent quandary for today's critical scholars to negotiate within categories of globe, nation, and region, none of which are wholly adequate to the situation. Probably the best one can do is recognise the need to have a critical perspective on every possible formation, and discern meaning and insight within the mesh of our interaction with those formations. As Mead's

steady, optimistic detailing of the institutional depth of Australian literary studies shows, persistent effort can pay off. As Fay Zwicky—a critical-regionalist poet if ever there was one—put it: “Crenellated images prick out / in fevered paper constellation minds / That know beauty / when they see it” (Zwicky 74).

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