MONUMENTAL AUTHORITY AND REGIONAL IDENTITY: THE MUNICIPAL CANONISATION OF GEORGE ESSEX EVANS

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In a small Toowoomba park perched on the edge of the escarpment which is the Great Dividing Range there stands an impressive monument to the local poet George Essex Evans. The monument consists of two truncated columns of unequal length united by a trevase of the same stone mounted upon a basalt pedestal inscribed on each side with verse quotations from the poet's work. Each column is encircled with a spiralling garland of laurel leaves in high relief. How does a memorial such as this function? Why was it established? Who reads it and how? What role does it play as a cultural marker for the municipality, the State, the Nation, and the Empire which administer it?

One way of reading monuments is through the architectural conventions which inform their design. According to these conventions the truncated columns of the Essex Evans Memorial signify a life cut short while the laurel leaves symbolise the spirit of his verse which remains a living force in the world he has departed. This architectural reading, however, is the product of a set of codes which are not widely disseminated amongst either the civic, State, or national population. They exist in institutionally based knowledges which seldom inform the interpretative practices of the passing subject.

Work on memorials in this country has often been circumspect on the problems associated with how the subject responds to them. Some historians have been content to locate the significance of the monument in the intentions of its builders and in the way the structure itself interpellates the viewer. These explanations seem to me to suffer the same problem as the architectural interpretation of the monument in that they rely upon interpretative practices grounded in the codes of a professional knowledge. Annette Hamilton has noted that 'very little comparative theoretical work has as yet been directed towards the social, historical, and cultural analysis of "the monument"' (Hamilton 102). Her own practice attempts to discuss memorials through their location within a signifying space inscribed by popular discourses. 'Monuments', she argues, 'exist as physical signs around which authorising narratives can solidify' (106). This point has much in common with Stephen Greenblatt's advocacy for a form of literary historiography which he calls Cultural Poetics. Cultural poetics is concerned with the way in which historical meaning circulates through a variety of texts which are differentially organised through a range of institutionally located contexts of reception. The monument, seen from this theoretical perspective, does not exist on its own. It functions in conjunction with a number of motivated discourses with which it shares its historical object. My discussion of the George Essex Evans monument is for this reason directed towards the complex insertion of the memorial in a network of institutions which deploy it in the production of different forms of social, cultural and political authority.

The most significant institution associated with the Essex Evans Monument is The Toowoomba Ladies Literary Society. Founded in September 1913 by Lady Littleton Groom, the wife of the then Federal Member for the Darling Downs, Sir Littleton Ernest Groom, the Ladies Literary Society was originally conceived as a self

improvement society for young women. Since then the Society has emerged as the most important custodian of Toowoomba's literary heritage. The society is not responsible for the Essex Evans memorial which was built in 1909. Since its inception, however, it has set a plaque on the site of Essex Evans's home and erected commemorative cairns or plaques to the humorist Steele Rudd (1950), the critic A.G. Stephens (1967), and the poet, essayist, and long time president of the society, Margaret Curran (1963). More significantly for the concerns of this paper, however, the Society has instigated, and continues to promote, annual literary pilgrimages to the Essex Evans and Steele Rudd memorials.

The Ladies Literary Society's penchant for memorialising is attached to a particular sense of the uses of history. This sense is apparent in a newspaper report of the President of the Society's address on the occasion of the opening of the Steele Rudd Memorial in 1950:

> The president of the Steele Rudd Memorial Fund Committee (Mrs Margaret Curran) said during her address that the *history of man*, which was largely the *history of civilisation*, might be read in its *memorials*—often beautiful, and occasionally grotesque.
>
> *The degree of civilisation achieved by any community or country was measured by the attitude of the inhabitants toward its memorials.*
>
> Toowoomba was overlooked by a memorial to a poet, George Essex Evans; there was a memorial on the new Toowoomba Highway which had been raised to the memory of Sir Littleton Groom; and in Toowoomba's busiest centre, the tall greystone of remembrance known as the 'Mothers Memorial' was a stern reminder to the careless passer by that freedom was purchased 'at a great price.' Now, another memorial has been erected only a few yards from the very birthplace of a native genius.
>
> The Toowoomba Literary Society, Mrs Curran added, had begun the movement to provide the memorial . . . because it 'did not choose that the land from which he sprung, should be *shamed*' by utter forgetfulness.
>
> (My emphasis, *Toowoomba Chronicle* 20 Nov 1950)

Memorials, according to this formulation, are a type of historical architecture which inscribe a form of ethical (civilised) sensibility within the municipal space. Toowoomba is civilised by the monuments which continually prompt the 'careless passer by' to rehearse a set of ethical values which the monument somehow locates.

Margaret Curran's reading of the semantic function of the memorial is no different from the architectural and historical readings mentioned earlier in that it is powerless to constrain the passing subject to respond according to the logic of its interpretative procedures. What makes Curran's reading different from these other interpretations is its deployment in the literary pilgrimages which annually celebrate Essex Evans, Steele Rudd and their respective monuments. These pilgrimages are cultural rituals which invent traditions (to use Eric Hobsbawm's formulation) that seek to mark Toowoomba's Literary memorials with a particular significance. The George Essex Evans and the Steele Rudd pilgrimages are attempts to inscribe the monuments and the municipal spaces which they mark with a set of ethical associations which are derived from a practice of reading which functions as a technique of self fashioning.

A pilgrimage, as everyone well knows, is a journey to a sacred place. The literary pilgrimage canonises the poet as a substitute religious figure and establishes him as a versatile source of moral, social, cultural, and political authority. This shift in

signification from Religion to Culture has its roots in the nineteenth century, and the Toowoomba Ladies Literary Society's consecration of the Poet has much in common with Thomas Carlyle's veneration of the poet as a visionary hero (see Carlyle 311-46). The 1918 editorial of the society's only venture into print, *The Lamp*, sets out the relationship between the poet and the Ladies Literary Society, and that Society and the general citizenry of the Toowoomba region:

> . . . we have turned our eyes to the torch of knowledge and sought for light divine. Some time ago we first met together under an inspiration that moved us to higher things. As the deeper movements of national life surged around us we longed to hold communion with those great souls whose masterpieces are the pride of our literature. We have made companions of the poets, dramatists and novelists. *We have endeavoured to sink our individual personality and to see life from their point of view.* Our eyes have been opened and we have seen . . . the nobler and higher impulses of life. We have realised that:
>
> Poetry is itself a thing of God,
> He made His prophets poets, and the more
> We feel of poesy do we become
> Like God in love and power—undermakers.
> (Emphasis added 'Editorial' *The Lamp* 3)

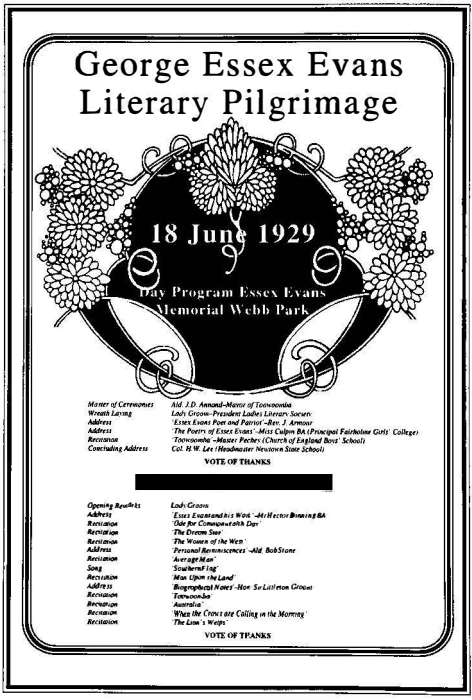
The poet here is an inspired visionary who dispenses revelation to his less inspired audience. This audience's ability to recognise a revelation when they see one sets them apart from the more general populace and authorises their missionary role in the wider dissemination of 'the light . . . which has come to us through the great masters' (3). The reading practice promoted by the Ladies Literary Society is a technique characteristic of a nineteenth-century Romantic aesthetic education which sought as its object the synthesis of what Ian Hunter, following on from Michel Foucault, has called the 'divided ethical substance'. According to Hunter

> the functions of criticism for the Romantics are primarily exemplary and educative and, indeed, remain so for us. Their job is to induct the individual into a certain mode of ethical subjectification: to secure the recognition of a specific kind of ethical obligation in relation to the shaping of a self. Criticism is to bring the reader into that relation to the work in which he 'becomes aware of his incompleteness', and is thus forced to begin the endless task of self-culture. . . . Romantic criticism . . . was installing the practical means of forming a certain kind of person.
> (Hunter 186-87)

The George Essex Evans annual literary pilgrimage is a municipal ritual which puts the Society's Romantic Cultural program into practice.

Before we can arrive at an adequate understanding of the pilgrimage's role in terms of the formation of a municipal, state, national, and ultimately imperial subject we need to know a number of things about it. How is the poet produced not just by the Society's reading practice but by the selections from his works which make up such a large component of the ritual's performance? Who spoke and who attended? How does the site of the memorial and the memorial itself support the ritual of which it is the focus? These questions are not easily answered and while I have progressed some way in my investigations of them I have not been able to boil my provisional responses down into the twenty minutes I have been allocated today. I therefore propose to take up the issue

The program for the inaugural pilgrimage in 1929 took the following form.



George Essex Evans
Literary Pilgrimage

18 June 1929

Day Program Essex Evans
Memorial Webb Park

Master of Ceremonies	*Ald. J.D. Annand-Mayor of Toowoomba*
Wreath Laying	*Lady Groom-President Ladies Literary Society*
Address	*'Essex Evans Poet and Patriot'-Rev. J. Armour*
Address	*'The Poetry of Essex Evans'-Miss Culpin BA (Principal Fairholme Girls' College)*
Recitation	*'Toowoomba'-Master Peeler (Church of England Boys' School)*
Concluding Address	*Col. H.W. Lee (Headmaster Newtown State School)*

VOTE OF THANKS

Opening Remarks	*Lady Groom*
Address	*'Essex Evans and his Work'-Mr Hector Bunning BA*
Recitation	*'Ode for Commonwealth Day'*
Recitation	*'The Dream Sun'*
Recitation	*'The Women of the West'*
Address	*'Personal Reminiscences'-Ald. Bob Stone*
Recitation	*'Average Man'*
Song	*'Southern Cross'*
Recitation	*'Man Upon the Land'*
Address	*'Biographical Notes'-Hon. Sir Littleton Groom*
Recitation	*'Toowoomba'*
Recitation	*'Australia'*
Recitation	*'When the Crows are Calling in the Morning'*
Recitation	*'The Lion's Weigh'*

VOTE OF THANKS

of who spoke in an attempt to exemplify the complex circulation of political energies which characterise the pilgrimage and its attempt to inscribe the Essex Evans monument with a particular significance.

The political utility of a ritual such as this depends to a large extent on who speaks, what do they speak about, and who listens. Who attended? Newspaper reports of both the day and evening meetings of the pilgrimage indicate a substantial attendance, naming in particular the four local schools which attended as well as a number of local educational, religious, and political figures ('Essex Evans Anniversary' 7). The invitation lists recorded in the Society's minute books reveal that personal invitations were sent to the relevant local, State and Federal politicians, the principals of the local schools, the poet's family, the Heads of a number of the region's societies: the Royal Society of St George, the Caledonian, Shakespeare, and Philharmonic societies, the Rotary Club, Australian Natives' Association, the Burns Club, the Hibernian Society, and the Darling Downs Teachers' Association. The local ministers of the respective churches were also invited.

Who spoke and what did they have to say? The master of ceremonies for the daylight gathering at the memorial was Alderman J.D. Annand, the Mayor of Toowoomba. Opening remarks were given by the founder and patron of the Ladies Literary Society, Lady Groom. In the early years addresses were usually given by a local school teacher, politician, friend of the poet, or one of the local clergy with a literary interest. The poetry recitations were generally performed by members of the society. Until his death in 1936, Sir Littleton Groom was a regular speaker. The addresses in the early years discussed Essex Evans, his interests and personal qualities, and the local and aesthetic significance of his poetry, although on occasions speakers addressed the work of other Australian writers. In recent years academics from Brisbane, Armidale, and Toowoomba itself have given the addresses, and the topics of discussion have covered the full range of Australian literature.

The participation in the pilgrimage of the heads of Toowoomba's key middle class institutions alongside the local civic, state, and federal politicians is an indication of the municipal, state, and national significance of the ritual. These figures play an important role in the authorisation of the pilgrimage's civic status but this process of authorisation also functions in the reverse direction. Toowoomba's leading public figures derive a cultural status from their involvement in the ritual which approvingly represents them as the city's ethical exemplars. Sir Littleton Groom's role in the pilgrimage is a good example of this. Groom is a significant political figure in the history of the Downs. He entered parliament in 1901 to replace his father who died in that year. Over the next 28 years he held six cabinet posts in a succession of governments. In September 1929 he helped bring down the Bruce National Government when as Speaker he refused to use his casting vote to support the Government's maritime industries bill. His defeat as an independent in the subsequent federal election 'brought to an end nearly seventy years continuous parliamentary representation of the Toowoomba district by the Groom family'. Two years later he won back the seat and died in office on the 6 November 1936 (Carment 132).

Groom's cabinet appointments brought him a significant amount of personal, political, and cultural authority in the Darling Downs region and helped to effect the insertion of the citizenry of the Downs into an active participation in the 'imagined community' of the Nation (Anderson). The literary pilgrimage produces an identity which is predominantly regional, but it needs to be recognised that Groom's political position and the centrality of the rural and pioneering myths to imaginative accounts of

the Nation enabled this regional identity to function comfortably as a National authenticity. This does not mean, of course, that the Federal Government necessarily found favour with the citizenry of the Darling Downs. What it means is that when the government diverted from a political course approved by the citizenry of the Downs it was held to account for tampering with the integrity of the National idea as they authentically perceived it. This speaking position is still frequently employed today by National Party politicians seeking to express the interests of the Bush.

Groom's involvement with the pilgrimage lent it a considerable amount of prestige. His short address at the evening meeting which immediately followed the pilgrimage exemplifies the use to which he put the poet. At this meeting, the Federal member recalls his close personal friendship with the poet and relates a number of anecdotes which skilfully use his participation in Federal parliament and the key political figures of his era to confer status on Essex Evans:

> I was sitting in the house of Representatives in Melbourne beside the then Prime Minister, the Hon. Alfred Deakin. A debate was in progress. A messenger came in and handed me a telegram . . . It conveyed the sad news that George Essex Evans had passed away. I handed the telegram to Mr Deakin who . immediately . . . penned . . . the following message to the sorrowing widow: 'deeply grieved at sudden and unexpected death of your greatly gifted husband. Australia will mourn the loss of her national poet . . .'
>
> ('Essex Evans Anniversary' 12)

Groom then narrates another incident which reveals the politician's advisory role in the early revisions of Essex Evans' 'Queensland University Ode' ('Essex Evans Anniversary' 12). Groom's speech produces Essex Evans as a poet of National significance while the politician, in turn, is enacted as a man of culture and learning. The success of this strategy of political self-representation is best demonstrated by Groom's own memorial, which bears the following inscriptions:

> He brought the dispositions which are lovely in private life into the service and conduct of the Commonwealth.
>
> A cultured and distinguished Australian his name is honoured in the land he loved.

Quite clearly the pilgrimage and its addresses function to use the politician's public authority to confer status on the poet and the poet's 'private' authority to confer status upon the politician. Groom's reputation for Culture is a significant political asset. When Culture functions as an identity which offers deliverance from the alienating effects of the public world it is able to transform the political figure into an ethical exemplum who exists above or beyond politics. Groom, a significant public figure, is here inscribed within a domestic space which is by definition respectable. In a period of significant federal political turmoil the advantages of such an inscription are obvious.

The Essex Evans Pilgrimage performs a series of putatively compatible identities as a staged disavowal of the many significant conflicts and tensions which characterised the post-Federation era in this country. Catholic and protestant, labour and capital, the city and the bush, the State and the Nation, and the Nation and the Empire were often irreconcilably opposed to each other during the inter war years. Six months after participating in the inaugural Essex Evans pilgrimage Sir Littleton Ernest Groom brought down the Bruce government by refusing to cast his deciding vote as Speaker of the House of Representatives. Groom was consequently disendorsed and lost his seat at the ensuing elections. The pressure brought to bear by these external complications is

complemented by internal pressures which threaten to expose the fissures which the ritual seeks to efface. The ritual's use of the romantic aesthetic attempts to banish external political issues by seeking to transform troubled political identities into compatible aesthetic sensibilities. The array of political figures who frequently graced the ritual's stage confronts such a gesture with its own disingenuousness. The ritual is racked by the contradictions it disavows. Its move to present the contiguity of city, nation, and empire is undercut by the ritual's insistence on promoting the superiority of the Downs itself. This act of self-promotion is part of a project which represents the Downs as an authenticating centre. Such a move reveals the desire inscribed in the ritual to impose the conservative bourgeois provincial values of the institutions involved in the ritual upon the differences of region, nation, and empire. The George Essex Evans pilgrimage is a program of social, cultural and political control which, like all such programs, is disrupted and resisted by the others which it would banish.

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