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Australian Writing and the City

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of the 1999 Conference

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New South Wales Writers' Centre
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edited by

Fran de Groen and Ken Stewart

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Contents

	FOREWORD	v
PETER CONRAD	Sydney, Not the Bush	7
DEIRDRE COLEMAN	The Camp as 'New Albion': Early Visions and Views of Sydney	18
ROWENA MOHR	Approximating the World: Women, 'Civilisation' and Colonial Melbourne	31
CHERYL TAYLOR	'Randolph the Reckless': Explorations in Australian Masculine Identity, 1889–1941	38
ANN VICKERY	Ready-Made Dissidence? The Figure of the Factory Girl in Modern Australian Poetry	46
BRIGID ROONEY	'A little bit of the real Sydney': Gender, Socialism and the City in Works by William Lane and Christina Stead	54
PETER KIRKPATRICK	Walking through <i>Seven Poor Men of Sydney</i>	62
JULIAN CROFT	How <i>l'immonde cité</i> became Sydney a fine town	68
PHILIP MEAD	A Prose <i>Kinema</i> : Slessor's Film Writing	77
DAVID MUSGRAVE	Post-Carnivalism in David Ireland's <i>The Unknown Industrial Prisoner</i>	88
NOEL ROWE	Vincent Buckley: The City and the Sacred	94
ROBERT BEARDWOOD	'Something brand new on the horizon': Renovating the City in Contemporary Australian Crime Fiction	101
SELINA SAMUELS	Cityscape and Mythscape	108
DONNA LEE BRIEN	'Blackrock' and Australian True Crime Fiction	115

DAVID MCCOOEY	The City and the Contemporary Australian Long Poem	122
BERNADETTE BRENNAN	Brian Castro's Tokyo: Schizophrenic Semiotic	129
DON GRAHAM	Michael Wilding's 'Lost Illusions': The Balzacian Underpinnings of <i>Wildest Dreams</i>	138
SIGRUN MEINIG	An Australian Convict in the Great English City: Peter Carey's <i>Jack Maggs</i>	144
LEON CANTRELL	Do We Have a Discipline? The Great Australian Literature Debate	150
TOM BURVILL	Nostalgia in the Global City: Recuperating the Battler in the Sydney Production of <i>Cloudstreet</i>	157
HAZEL SMITH	From City to Cyberspace: Writing the City in Multimedia	164
WENCHE OMMUNDSEN	The Circus is in Town: Literary Festivals and the Mapping of Cultural Heritage	173

Foreword

The papers collected for this book were presented, in their original versions, at the Conference of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature held at the New South Wales Writers' Centre from 2–6 July, 1999. Over sixty papers were delivered at ASAL 99; financial constraints permit the publication of only twenty two. The editors have generally selected papers relating to the Conference theme, Australian Writing and the City. All papers submitted for consideration were refereed by qualified academic members of ASAL.

Contributors' responses to 'the city' were properly diverse: the term sets up a complex range of associations. These may be as negative as 'dreadful night' or as positive as 'marvellous' Melbourne; and may be, *inter alia*, archetypal, geographical, historical, sociological, religious, mythical or exotic. In writing especially, 'the city' will often be a trope, though its status as a device may be concealed by other associations. Even the most 'literal' representation, moreover, is likely to draw upon established fictions or to construct new ones.

In Australian writing, particularly, 'the city' is likely to be set against or draw meaning from that equally diverse and volatile signifier 'the country' – a 'country' or 'Bush' generally not that of Europe, or Asia. Indeed the strength and commonness of the city/country binary may obscure other oppositions and synecdoches: the (Australian) city versus, for example, 'imperial' or 'metropolitan' London; or the 'wilds' or 'wilderness', or iconically as a representation of nation, or within the postmodern capitalist 'globe'. The papers selected exemplify these and many other 'cities'. Together they confirm that, in view of this diversity and complexity, to generalise within received frames of reference and monolithically about 'Australian Writing and the City' is no longer as easy or helpful as commentators once traditionally assumed. The city, in some guise, was always visible and quite prominent in Australian writing, though the 'bush' legends of commentators (which themselves acknowledge, require and often derive from the 'city') have sometimes blinkered literary historians (both 'for' and 'against' the bush legend).

From amongst the diverse urban tropes and constructions explored in these papers, it may be interesting to list a few figures and preoccupations that recur. These include the city as a site for 'real' and figurative nomadic activity (a counter to the usual emphasis on the *rural* nomad); the figure of the *flâneur* in an Australian context; the industrial 'city' as a site where gendered and class roles are forged, maintained and contested; the 'city' as a site of divine immanence or perpetual material and imaginative 'renovation'; 'Australian' cities as 'modernist', and as 'postmodern'; the city as 'imagined community', and as 'erogenous zone'. The language used to explore the city in these papers is as diverse as the themes ex-

plored, varying from lucid, imaginative evocation to sophisticated theorised critical discourse. Recent critical theory itself, we may be certain, has heightened awareness of the city in Australian writing as potentially something more than a geographical entity.

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Fran de Groen & Ken Stewart