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Australian Writing and the City

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edited by

Fran de Groen and Ken Stewart

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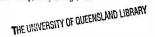
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Foreword

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' Center 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 synechdoches: 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 flaneur 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