

Do We Have a Discipline? The Great Aust Lit Debate

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Whether or not the discipline of the study of Australian literature has a future (or even a present) is currently the subject of major debate. The latest issues of our two leading Australian literature journals contain special sections devoted to the issue. *Australian Literary Studies* calls for 'further debate' on 'the current state and future directions of studies in Australian literature' (Dale 1999, 31). A *Southerly* contributor identifies trends which might 'possibly short-circuit the whole Austlit project in the academy' (Hughes-D'Aeth 37).

Yet until recently Australian literature had been identified as a healthy if minor discipline, or at least a major subdiscipline, of English. Courses in Australian literature have been taught in our universities for more than forty years. The Association for the Study of Australian Literature has held annual conferences for more than twenty years. Formal histories and studies of Australian literature began to appear over a hundred years ago and have proliferated in the last fifteen. We have had at least two chairs of Australian literature in our universities, and any number of lectureships described as being in Aust Lit. All of these indicators proclaim Australian literature as an academic discipline: an area or field with its own coherent body of knowledge, an area of recognised research activity and excellence.

Further direct support for the idea of Australian literature as an active discipline comes from a recent report into research practices in Australian university English departments. The report showed that 30.5% of current researchers in English identified Australian Literature as their area of primary research (Cantrell). This was by far the largest self-identified group, only slightly smaller than the combined total who identified English Literature from the 17th, 18th, 19th or 20th centuries as their major focus. There is no doubt that this allegiance to research in Australian writing represents a huge shift away from more traditional concerns, and occurring over not much more than a single academic generation. Some even argue that Australian literary studies are in a good state of health, with 'no sign of irreversible dissolution' (Henderson 43).

But doubts about our discipline have been gathering strength for more than a decade. Arguably, the study of Australian literature is an anachronism in a sea of much more broadly based studies: women's studies, cultural studies, Australian studies, post colonial studies, gender studies, communication studies, media and multi-media. Australian literature as a discipline has been characterised as too inward looking, too local, and as owing too much of its intellectual foundations to

now discredited ideas as to what constitutes the Australian experience and the Australian understanding of nation (Turner, 1998).

Ian Hunter fired one of the first shots in this debate in 1988. Hunter's article was part of his larger work on the development of English as a discipline. Hunter located the rise of English in Australia in the nineteenth century public or state schools. He argued that the discipline was not institutionalised by the education system, but was the product of the education system as an institution. English emerged from the organisational imperatives of a new and specific social technology: the popular education system. It was the NSW school system in particular, he says, 'that formed the sea of literacy on which the *Bulletin* floated' (734). Hunter's important work recast earlier claims that English somehow had its origins in the universities. He drew our attention to the importance of what was going on in our schools to readers' subsequent engagement with literature either in the universities or in the community at large. Such a perspective also struck hard at the prevailing notion that the *Bulletin's* success was a measure of its nationalistic fervour. Hunter saw its success as a product of an efficient colonial civil service. This insight suggested that Australian literary studies needed to be much more broadly located than hitherto if it was to survive the challenge to traditional constructions of national identity which followed the bicentennial celebration of 1988.

Bill Ashcroft (1992) advanced this position by arguing that the crisis in Australian literary studies was not simply the result of its reliance on out-moded concepts of nation and nationalism. He identified the constrictions imposed on literary studies by artificial disciplinary boundaries, as well as the challenge posed by literary theory, as further threats to the Australian literature discipline. It was ironical that this new challenge to the legitimacy of Australian literary studies should come again from within the academy. As Leigh Dale reminded us in her 1997 account of the development of English in Australian universities, it was those very English departments that for decades earlier had actively resisted the introduction of studies in Australian writing. Because the British nationalism that energised the discipline of English 'in its early years had been overwritten with a (hi)story of universal value', she argued, 'nationalist arguments for the study of Australian literature were easily discredited, as self-evidently partisan, political, and theoretically unsophisticated. The Anglophile sentiment that pervaded the academy helped to produce a narrative of resistance, one that still pervades Australian literary and cultural studies, which with equal relentlessness recuperates the mythic egalitarianism of white working-class men as the central element of national identity. What is brought into being as distinctively Australian is not a set of cultural practices, a landscape, or a different set of histories, but a single figure, the typical Australian, whose accents and attitudes stand in for the population at large' (190).

While this analysis might seem a little dated, and not taking sufficient account of some of the complexities of the debates which have surfaced in Australian literature and Australian studies during the last decade, it nonetheless suggests that the proponents of Australian literary studies may have been at least partly to blame for the discipline's seeming crisis. Dale's other point, the failure of Australian

literature to compete for space in traditional English Departments, was repeated by Tony Hassall, formerly one of the only two professors of Australian literature in our universities, in a 1998 volume celebrating the University of Queensland Press. Although UQP had made a substantial contribution to its study, Hassall wrote, there was still not nearly enough Australian Literature taught in our universities. There are still only two chairs of Australian literature. In the 1960s, Hassall continued, 'English literature precluded or marginalised Australian literature. Nowadays English departments give generous space to Literary Theory, Cultural Studies, Women's Studies and Postcolonial Studies, and while these are worthy in their own right, they continue to displace or marginalise Australian literature' (181).

This belief that there has been some kind of conspiracy against the study of Australian literature, part of a recurrent cultural cringe, was addressed in several ways in the most recent substantial account of the field, the 1998 *Oxford Literary History of Australia*. In a chapter dealing with the founding of a canon between 1851 and 1914, Elizabeth Perkins acknowledged that the 'fashions of the academy', responding to changes in the socio-political climate, have an impact on the ways in which writers are read and studied. The great heroes of nineteenth-century Australian poetry, Gordon and Kendall, for example, are now seen as less central and important to the development of writing in Australia than are Lawson or Paterson or Brennan or Baynton.

Graeme Turner, in the same volume, advanced the argument on a more rhetorical basis. He had no time for the conspiracy notion. Instead, he argued, in the late twentieth century competition for the hearts and minds of Australians, literature has lost out to film and even sometimes to television. 'Notwithstanding the success of Australian writing and the enhancement of its visibility here and overseas since the mid-1960s', he wrote, 'and despite the popularity of Writers' Festivals which are now located in most capital cities, it would be wrong to suggest that literature remains, any longer, popularly and securely regarded as the pre-eminent national art form' (349). Film in particular, Turner argued, in terms of its cultural visibility and popular currency, has outstripped literature to a significant degree. 'Although the film and television industries produce a much smaller number of stories and employ a more restricted range of modes of storytelling than the fiction industry, their products are seen by many more people, they occupy a more central place in most Australians everyday lives, and they also play a significant role in the aesthetic choices and the cultural repertoires of educated Australians' (350). Australian literature, in this analysis, has given way to Australian film and television as pre-eminent forms of local cultural discourse.

Such a shift is reflected in the new English syllabus for the NSW higher school certificate, approved by the Board of Studies for introduction in 2000. The syllabus offers a total range of twenty-four Australian cultural texts for three groups of students. The study of Shakespeare remains compulsory. Only two Australian novels are included but there is a strong representation of indigenous writing and a selection of films and television productions (all ABC). The syllabus is described

by the Board as enabling 'students to appreciate the richness of Australia's cultural heritage and the diversity in society' (16). To reintroduce Ian Hunter's theme, this syllabus is the sea on which future readers of Australian literature in NSW will float, or learn to swim, or sink.

Turner's chapter went on to provide a cogent theoretical account of why this shift away from the study of Australian literary texts has occurred. The post-structuralist withdrawal from the certainties of aesthetic value, for example, exposed literature to the task of justifying itself in new ways. At the same time, the advocacy of multicultural and indigenous writing in Australia, the new focus on the construction and maintenance of difference, ushered in new criteria of critical analysis and judgment. These new criteria rejected such traditional defences of literature as the invocation of universal values. Political examination of the Australian literary canon, on the other hand, set out to expose 'the social conservatism and, ultimately, the neo-colonialism of this concept in practice. Such arguments clearly undermined the achievements of what had been the primary constructive activity of Aust literary criticism for most of the twentieth century – arguing for the legitimacy of an Australian tradition, a national 'canon' (352). Other emerging forms of cultural analysis, Turner observed, which foregrounded context over text, allowed such new multidisciplinary areas as Australian studies and cultural studies to compete aggressively with Australian literature in the academic marketplace.

Turner saw this disciplinary shift as being assisted by developments in the Australian literature discipline itself. The reworking of the radical nationalist agenda, to which Leigh Dale referred, has not been easy to sell. 'Many of those working in Australian literary studies over this period', Turner wrote, 'were quite uncomfortable with the very idea of a national literature' (353). Nationalism and nationalist studies have not been popular concerns within the humanities for the past generation. The study of Australian literature, in its various guises, has come to be seen as too closely aligned to an old fashioned and conservative idea of the nation and the ideal of nationalism. It is noteworthy that in the Federal government's 1999 Green Paper on research in Australian universities, there should be a claim that the purpose of research in areas such as Australian literature is to make a major contribution to our sense of identity and cohesiveness as a nation. It is difficult to reconcile this 'official' view with the current debate in the discipline.

Another current professor of Australian literature, Elizabeth Webby, reviewed the *Oxford Literary History of Australia* in *Southerly*. She too traced a decline in the role and importance of the once burgeoning discipline of Australian literature. She identified a declining national significance for the discipline and asked whether this decline related to a splintering of a sense of a national audience, or whether it was related to a greater questioning of what is meant by Australian identity. Her conclusion was oddly optimistic: Australian literature may no longer be crucial to the nation, but can we exist without it? Webby's rhetorical question implies that the answer is 'no', but equally, we can argue that the evidence presented by Turner and others suggests that a 'yes' answer is just as valid.

Oddly enough, Turner's original chapter in the *Oxford Literary History* had a similarly positive conclusion. He indicated he was impressed by the capacity of Australian writing to survive and prosper despite all apparent difficulties. Australian literary culture, he suggested, is successfully negotiating its survival against the pressures of globalisation, the need to accommodate international theoretical and critical arguments and the requirement to develop new versions of the national through a diversity of textual forms.

A recent article by Michael Wilding on Australian literary and scholarly publishing in its international context, however, challenged this optimism. The concentration of Australian publishing in foreign ownership, said Wilding, has never been higher. Academic and scholarly publishing in Australia is in an especially unhealthy condition. This constraint on the promulgation of research outcomes, combined with an apparent research funding focus on the potential for nation building results, does not augur well for the future of Australian literary research with its limited market in a world increasingly dominated by commercial and intellectual conglomerates. Web-based publishing, briefly discussed by Wilding, may be a partial answer to problems of distribution, but it does not provide a solution to the core question of the medium term viability of the discipline of Australian literature itself.

It seems impossible not to conclude that the discrete disciplinary study of Australian literature is in decline and may be absorbed into other more broadly-based and laterally-motivated endeavours. Mandy Treagus has argued that those who teach Australian literature should select texts which indicate diversity so as to emphasise a view of the nation which is inclusive. This is very much the approach of the new NSW higher school certificate syllabus. Tony Hughes-D'Aeth has called for a multi-disciplinary approach to the teaching of Australian writing. He argues that texts should be used 'in ways that vivify and make relevant the issues that confront students and the broader community' (41). Margaret Henderson gives the example of developing a new curriculum for a new campus where Australian literary texts are not central, where they are in fact 'fairly marginalised', but where their importance in a discussion of contemporary issues and knowledge has allowed them entry 'through the side door' (46).

On the other hand, Leigh Dale has recently suggested that rather than focus on cross-disciplinary links within the boundaries of 'nation' or of that which is perceived as of contemporary relevance, we should explore intra-disciplinary connections across national boundaries. A recent article by Gillian Whitlock gives some illuminating insights into such an approach. Whitlock suggests that an examination of colonial texts out of Africa shows us similarities rather than differences with the Australian colonial experience and heightens our understanding of who we really are. David Carter too doubts our ability to entirely rid ourselves of a notion of the nation. Like Treagus, Carter sees a role for Australian literature in forming 'good citizens' (139). He argues for the study of Australian literature to be seen as enabling the theorisation and activation of a 'positive' account of the nation, 'not in a simple celebratory sense, but in the sense of substantive histories,

institutions or cultural possibilities that we want either to maintain or to bring into being' (150).

Even Carter's positive and optimistic account of possible future work in Australian literature does not suggest the continued existence of a stand-alone discipline. The financial and organisational realities of contemporary Australian universities and schools put great pressure on scholars and administrators to see new work in the humanities as being most viable if multi-disciplinary and multi-national. In this context, the demise of Australian literary studies and the rise of Australian studies, or cultural studies, or gender studies, or new intra-discipline studies across national boundaries, must be seen as part of the new organisation of knowledge in our educational institutions as well as a reflection of changing perceptions of the nation.

From this perspective, it is interesting to return to Margaret Henderson's account of the 'side door' entry of the study of Australian literature into the new humanities program at the University of Queensland's Ipswich campus. Henderson suggests that one of the prices exacted from the discipline for even this inauspicious entry was that students should receive only 'fairly narrow, shallow, and potentially ahistorical understanding' of the chosen texts. In addition, the texts were not to be studied for their 'literariness' but only as examples 'of something else'. Such arrangements, Henderson claims, have taken scholars responsible for teaching the course away from their own (inter)disciplinary field(s) and have created 'fairly large disjunctions between research, curriculum development, and teaching areas' (47).

I would argue that outcomes such as these are not necessarily bad or unproductive. If the Ipswich arrangements have rescued Australian literature from a traditional academic focus on 'literariness' and have turned it into 'something else', then it might just be that this metamorphosis has made the texts more attractive, interesting and valuable to the students than if the books had been read as part of a conventional Aust Lit course. Similarly, the 'fairly large disjunctions' between teaching and research produced by the Ipswich curriculum model must create inter- and multi-disciplinary opportunities to shape agendas which are excitingly 'something else' and of more potential than any re-run of earlier models. It may help to recognise that the apparent demise of the discipline is also part of the more general decline in the notion of disciplinarity as an organising principle of either knowledge or universities. Perhaps then the future of Australian literary studies lies as much in the ability and willingness of its workforce to participate in intellectual and academic enterprises more broadly based than any single discipline could be, as in its equally necessary responses to new concepts of nation or literary discourse.

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