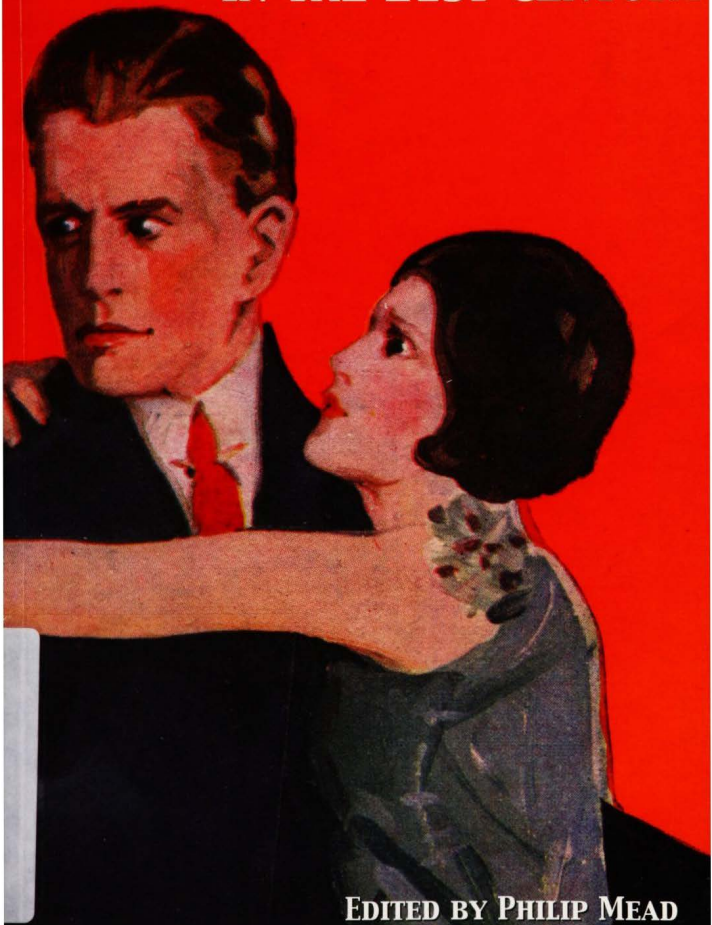
AUSTRALIAN LITERARY STUDIES IN THE 21ST CENTURY



EDITED BY PHILIP MEAD

Association for the Study of Australian Literature

Australian Literary Studies in the 21st Century

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edited by

Philip Mead

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Foreword

An ASAL conference and its subsequent Proceedings is necessarily an occasion for thinking about the current state of the discipline. And that means thinking about both its internal development as well as its external, institutional accommodation; about its origins as well as its future. Ken Ruthven has articulated some persuasive arguments for the maximum degree of self-consciousness, where the history of disciplines is concerned:

> Disciplines need to cultivate self-reflexiveness, because it enables them to understand – from situating their own histories in changing institutional topographies – the importance of modifying their agendas in response to different socio-economic circumstances. They also need to produce representations of themselves which will enable them to justify their activities by powerful arguments rather than by evoking nostalgia for an imaginary yesteryear. One way in which a discipline can develop this state of preparedness is by teaching the genealogy of its own formation, so that those who graduate in it can acquire an informed awareness of exactly which version of it they themselves have encountered, why, and in what ways their educational experience might have been otherwise. (97)

A discipline may be about the production and practice of knowledge – terms whose trajectory is abstract and universal in tendency – but it is crucial that we remind ourselves that that knowledge is actually socially constructed, specific, culturally marked (if not determined), contingent, politically informed, always open to new objects of enquiry. To those of us involved in Australian literary studies, it may feel like it's 'natural' that there be an interest in the productions of Australian writers (however defined), and that for reasons of national identity there should always be an open, well-funded space in which to study that writing, but the history of 'our' discipline should free us of those assumptions. The perennial work of ASAL may be a small increment in the production and evolution of knowledge, but all the same it represents an important contribution to the narratives by which the field survives.

Australian literary and critical studies comes into existence as an unwelcome intrusion into a hegemonic university 'English'. One particle of this originary context was the early 1935 'Future of Australian Literature' debate in the *Age* between Vance Palmer, Professor G.H. Cowling (Melbourne University), Frederick

Macartney, Miles Franklin, and others. Here an assertive, already differentiated, national writing culture, with at least four decades of vibrant and popularly successful production behind it, came up against the attempt by a representative of a powerful (but isolationist) institution like the university, to police the terms and conditions of cultural debate. This debate was to prompt P.R. Stephensen's manifesto *The Foundations of Culture in Australia* (1935-6) and, in turn, Rex Ingamells' *Conditional Culture* (1938). Another of Australian literary and critical studies' multiple points of origin is J.I.M. Stewart's notorious 1940 CLF lecture on 'Australian Literature' (in fact, on D.H. Lawrence's *Kangaroo*) which was based on the provocation that no Australian literature existed. (Stephensen had begun his *Foundations of Culture in Australia* with a reference to Lawrence, too, as it happens.)

These two well-known instances in Australian cultural politics are probably less black-and-white poles of imperial arrogance vs. nationalist over-confidence than symptomatic outbursts from an institution (the university) that was, even in the 1930s, beginning to feel the alien invasion of an inflected 'English', called 'Australian literature'. As 'English', with its variously national agendas hard-wired in, was establishing itself in the Australian university, it had also to contest an oppositional form of cultural nationalism. From as early as the 1920s, for example, one neonate version of Australian literary studies was thriving at the University of Sydney, under the influence of John le Gay Brereton (Challis Chair) and H.M. Green (University Librarian). Indeed, as Leigh Dale argues, the instances of imperial assertion represented by Cowling and Stewart can easily be read as proving that 'in the colonial environment [...], the *exclusion* of local literature was essential to the buttressing of the academic reputation of the "parent" discipline, the study of the literature of England, which was under considerable pressure to demonstrate its intellectual credentials' (Dale, 'New Directions' 134). Thus, if anything, the ignorance and complacency of Cowling and Stewart served to give an added impetus to the formative object of study they so disdained. Despite, or just as likely because of, Stewart's 1940 lecture, within a year or two, Adelaide University was running the first full course in Australian literature (Dale, 'New Directions' 134). It's also highly likely that P.R. Stephensen (who knew Lawrence) would have had more interesting things to say about, even, *Kangaroo* than Stewart did. The complexities and extensiveness of this narrative of disciplinary evolution are well told in Leigh Dale's *The English Men* (1997) (see also Nile and Walker).

Now, more than half a century after Cowling and Stewart's fifteen minutes of fame, as the twenty-first century flips over on the calendar, the institutional form of Australian literary and critical studies is characterised by an extensive array of disciplinary instruments: a broadly ensconced curriculum at secondary and tertiary levels (whatever its discontents and fluctuations), a recognisable canon (under constant review, like all good canons), a long backlist of critical monographs, biographies and essay collections, professional journals and associations, serious research recognition (Postdoctoral and ARC Fellows, for instance), designated Chairs, Companions, Histories, Bibliographies and Guides (all with major international university press imprimatur), centres abroad, significant library infrastructure (including electronic

resources, major bibliographical projects, and manuscript collections), and subsidised publishing projects. At the same time, the genetic material of its contentious origins as oppositional to 'an Anglocentric core' still seems to be at work within the various institutional and discursive manifestations of the field (Dale, 'New Directions' 134). As usual, perhaps, the annual Association for the Study of Australian Literature conference, played host to these genes and their 2000 incarnations.

The papers collected here represent a broad range of both the ongoing work of writers and scholars within the field and some of the meta-disciplinary issues that continue to be current. The three articles in *Australian Literary Studies* 19.2 (for October 1999) by Leigh Dale, David Carter and Gillian Whitlock, under the heading of 'New Directions in Australian Literary Studies?', were shaping influences on various aspects of work at the 2000 conference, including a panel discussion prepared in response the *ALS* articles by Tony Hassall. This panel included important addresses to the *ALS* articles from Tony Hassall, Catherine Pratt and Chris Lee. Much of the work in progress in these Proceedings can be understood within the contradictory and over-determined category of 'nation' outlined in the Dale-Carter-Whitlock articles. Andrew McCann's essay about 'Romantic nationalism,' Donald Pulford's about the postcolonial politics of Nowra's *The Golden Age*, Brigid Magner's about trans-Tasman impostures, and Peter Doley's about calypso and the bush ballad, for example, all help to drive the dialectic of 'nation' within the critical and cultural discourse of analysis – as theory, as postcolonial rereading, as 'migratory reading' (Whitlock 155-60) and as comparative literary-cultural studies. The three articles that specifically discuss the institutions of literary production – Diane Brown's, Anne Galligan's and Teresa Pitt's – are also obviously a contribution to the same dialectic, but from within an intra-disciplinary matrix that incorporates sociological methods.

In this collection, Ken Gelder's article is the stand-out piece that deals with that other aspect of the current Australian literary studies field identified by Carter: the theoretical critique of disciplinary foundations (145). Dale laments the substantive absence of this kind of critique (131-2). Gelder reads the protocols at work in the institutionalisation of 'Aust.lit' as essentially conservative, motivated by a (more or less) desperate attempt to 'ensure that the concept of a national literature remains intact'. And he addresses the Dale-Carter-Whitlock *ALS* articles directly: '[e]ach response continues to view the national defensively, speaking to it primarily through its neglect of the transnational or cross-cultural'. It is ironic that Gelder's argument rests on a critique of what he calls 'Aust.lit''s derogation of the popular. It was precisely popular forms (both fictional and poetic) that overwhelmingly constituted the world of Australian writing at the point where a 'transnational' English first expressed its anxiety and contempt for that world. Gelder's category of the 'popular' is probably in reality much less stable than he would wish, and he is not interested in the important process by which institutionalised study of cultural forms (like popular fiction) is constitutively conservative and at the same time creative of theorised spaces – like the ones Dale calls for. But he throws into highlight a couple of important aspects of the

Dale-Whitlock-Carter arguments. Far from being defensive, they understand very well how problematised the category of nation is, specifically in relation to literary representations and, more generally, to the objects of study of the new humanities. For them, as for anyone who has read or listened to (say) Ghassan Hage or Pauline Hanson, the concept of nation is already problematic, and certainly already 'transnational' in its heterogeneous stresses. Recent debate within the discipline, including the papers gathered here, demonstrates the maturity, inclusiveness and potential of its critique. 'Aust.lit' has been replaced by a complex and diversified set of discourses around Australian writing, its meanings and cultural values.

I am especially pleased that these Proceedings include a high proportion of work, mostly work in progress, by postgraduates, recent postgraduates and young researchers in postdoctoral positions. As editor, I have tried to balance the requirements of a fully refereed academic publication with the value of presenting work in progress, part of which was a conference presentation, as not exhaustive or final. The transcribed and edited conversations with Gabrielle Lord and Peter Minter, here, give some of the sense of the liveliness of the discussions with writers included in the conference (Ivor Indyk and Amanda Lohrey; Rod Mengham and John Kinsella; Jenna Mead and Tracy Ryan; Philip Mead and Richard Flanagan; Anna Johnston and Anthony Macris; Tseen Khoo and Simone Lazaroo; Rob Jarman and Louis Nowra were others). The keynote speakers – Peter Conrad in his opening address ('Lingo and Literature'), Lucy Frost in the Dorothy Green Memorial Lecture, Jimmy Everett on indigenous Tasmanian writing, Ivor Indyk on 'The Critic and Public Culture' and Gillian Whitlock on 'Autobiographical narratives in unsettled states' all offered very different stimulations. I'd like to make special mention of Auntie Ida West's welcome, from the Aboriginal community, to ASAL delegates. Peter Conrad's heartfelt response to his vanished past and Jimmy Everett's profound account of his life in cultural production (writing, film and activism), together with Auntie Ida's down-to-earth advice on practical reconciliation ('You've got a lot of work to do') were characteristically Tasmanian gestures.

The other important forum at the conference that has not been possible to represent here was the panel discussion of ARC and university funding of special relevance to postgraduates ('Applicationsville', 9 July). The presentations of Hilary Fraser, Jennifer Rutherford and Ann Vickery – informed, provocative, critical – presented for the first time at an ASAL conference, publicly and transparently, research and research-funding issues from a postgraduate-specific point of view. The aim here was to encourage debate about the infrastructure of the profession as well as about the means by which knowledge is produced. Teresa Pitt's paper represents at least one perspective from the successful panel on academic publishing ('Referees' Decisions', 9 July) which included Rosanne Fitzgibbon (UQP), Ian Syson, editor of *Overland* and Elizabeth McMahon, editor of the on-line journal *Australian Humanities Review*.

The Literature Fund of the Australia Council generously funded public readings by Gabrielle Lord, Anthony Macris, Peter Minter, and Emma Lew. The Faculty of Arts, University of Tasmania provided financial support for conference speakers, and the School of English and European Languages and Literatures provided generous conference support. I would like especially to thank my colleagues at the University of Tasmania, Professor Lucy Frost, Dr Anna Johnston, and Professor Malcolm Waters for all the contributions they made to the successful running of the conference. Equally, the conference wouldn't have happened without the support and work of Kate Walpole, Jo Richardson, Harry Andrews, Margaret Hicks, and Julia Baird. Vic Elliott (Head Librarian), Graeme Rayner and Gillian Ward were responsible for the two conference-related displays in the Morris Miller Library, 'Treasures from the Archive' and 'Jewelled Nights and Green Butterflies'.

In the preparation of these Proceedings I would like especially to thank the Editorial Board for its invaluable advice. Every member of the Board has generously devoted his or her time, expertise and care to the reading, assessing and editing of submitted papers. Because of proximity, of course, but also because of their commitment, Lucy Frost and Anna Johnston offered more than their fair share of editorial assistance. The production of this volume is greatly owing to the typesetting and design contribution of Cate Lowry. I would like to acknowledge the stylish and professional contribution of Gillian Ward, who designed the cover. Fran de Groen and Ian Syson also supported the production process in important ways.

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