

“Good Reading” in the *Australian Women’s Weekly*, 1933–1970

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The *Australian Women’s Weekly* has attracted attention in recent years from many different quarters; from historians of gender and consumerism in post-war Australia (see Sheridan); and from students of Australian popular culture, and of the corporate history of the Australian press (O’Brien, Griffen-Foley). One dimension of the magazine which seems to have escaped much scrutiny – no doubt, because the ever-popular *Weekly* has seemed (in generalising retrospect) somehow wedded to popular tastes and values – is its interest in promoting the idea and the practice of “good reading”, a preoccupation which persists and proliferates in its well-filled pages for at least the first three or four decades of the magazine’s existence.

This essay looks at how “good reading” was defined, discussed, encouraged and modelled in the *Weekly*, and at how this objective related to the magazine’s moral, political and social investments from the 1930s to the 1960s, a period in which it remains fairly constantly on the *Weekly’s* agenda. What emerges, it seems to me, is a succession of different engagements – some of them quite intensive and proactive, others merely dutiful – with the reading of books and authors beyond, and generally considered to be “above”, the *Weekly’s* own fictional fare. These engagements with “good reading” seem to have ceased almost entirely by the 1970s.

The 1930s marks some sort of watershed in the history of book-reading, not just in Australia, but in Britain and North America as well. Janice Radway, for example, argues that by the 1920s changes in the technology of printing and book-production and in the marketing and distribution of books had begun to produce significant changes in the way reading was valued and practised (154–221). It was a time when traditional assumptions about the value of reading were being questioned and defended with a new urgency. Was the reading of good books always a good thing? What made a book good or bad? Was it the book or the way it was read that was good or bad? Should children and women be encouraged to read the same “good books” as men? Was it possible to read too much for

your own good? These are some of the questions about reading *values* that were being canvassed in books, newspapers and magazines at this time.

It was also a time when a variety of new reading *practices* were emerging – and being either embraced or resisted: various techniques of “*fast* reading”, for example – skipping, skimming, digesting, and “filleting” books – were described, facilitated, and either embraced or attacked. Techniques of “*critical* reading” were also being recommended and exemplified, by the likes of Stuart Chase in America, C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards in Britain, and their Australian disciples and interpreters. Such techniques were often explicitly offered as a response to the advertising hype of the 1920s, the political propaganda of the 1930s, and the escapist fantasies of popular fiction that the hardships of the Depression made so attractive (e.g. Chase).

Another response to that same heightened sense of the power of print was of course to police access to it much more vigorously than ever before, by way of state censorship, which reached notorious levels in Australia during the 1930s, giving rise to equally vigorous and eventually effective forms of organized resistance (Buckridge). But quite apart from censorship, conditions in Australia in the 1930s were by no means conducive to the pursuit of good reading, even if that were taken to mean reading the classics (as it usually did), and still less so if it meant keeping up with contemporary literature. Books were expensive to buy; even lending library subscriptions were not particularly cheap, and public library facilities were extremely poor by British and American standards, especially outside the capital cities – so poor in fact that Andrew Carnegie, the American tycoon and philanthropist, donated large amounts of money towards improving them.¹

These then were the main features of the Australian reading context into which the *Women's Weekly* made its first foray in the early 1930s, and a surprising number of the broader issues just mentioned do appear in various parts of the magazine. By the end of 1939 there had been, for example:

- ♦ several articles, letters and editorials criticizing the state of Australia's public libraries and welcoming the Carnegie donations (17 Oct. 1936, p.12; 20 Feb. 1937, p.19; 13 March 1937, p.19; 27 March 1937, p.19; 28 Aug. 1937, p.19; 6 Aug. 1938, p.16);
- ♦ several outright attacks on state censorship and some more tentative calls to appoint a woman to the Censorship Board (17 June 1933, p.39; 8 July 1933, p.1; 22 July 1933, p.39; 5 Aug. 1933, p.24; 29 Dec. 1934, p.12; 24 Aug. 1935, p.3; 17 Oct. 1936, p.12; 19 March 1938, p.19; 3 Sept. 1938, p.25);
- ♦ several features promoting Australian literature and discussing Australia's large crop of contemporary women writers (12 Aug. 1933, p.10; 11 Aug. 1934, p.10; 23 March 1935, p.10; 6 April 1935, p.17; 13 April 1935, p.24; 27 April 1935, p.19; 24 Aug. 1935, p.19; 14 Sept. 1935,

- p.19; 26 Oct. 1935, p.10; 12 Dec.1936, p.31; 2 Sept. 1939, p.13);
- ♦ many attacks (usually by letter-writers) on “light fiction”, especially popular romance but also “crime fiction” (29 Dec.1934, p.12; 27 Feb. 1937, p.19; 13 Mar.1937, p.19; 20 Mar. 1937, p.19; 17 April 1937, p.17; 3 July 1937, p.19; 24 July 1937, p.17; 15 Jan.1938, p.19; 5 Feb. 1938, p.23; 30 July 1938, p.19; 25 Nov.1939, p.39);
 - ♦ debates about the literary hierarchy, sometimes using the terms “highbrow” and “lowbrow” (28 July 1934, p.33; 16 Nov. 1935, p.19; 21 March 1936, p.19; 11 April 1936, p.19; 11 July 1936, p.19; 21 Aug. 1937, p.19; 16 March 1938, p.15; 18 March 1939, p.15; 8 April 1939, p.19);
 - ♦ several articles and letters about new types and techniques of reading, for example “lazy”, “skipping”, “idle”, frequent rereading, reading the end of the story first, reading *for* beauty, or knowledge, or escape, or stimulation(28 March 1936, p.3; 11 April 1936, p.19; 3 Oct. 1936, p.23; 13 March 1937, p.19; 15 Jan. 1938, p.19; 22 Jan. 1938, p.21; 15 Oct. 1938, p.19; 29 April 1939, p.21; 28 Oct. 1939, p.20);
 - ♦ several news items and letters about reading-related events and organizations, such as Author’s Week, the Bush Book Club and the Junior Literary Society (29 July 1933, p.39; 19 Aug. 1933, p.35; 13 April 1935, p.10; 27 April 1935, p.19).

All of these issues and items are inflected to include a women’s angle: they are broached as questions about what women read, and about how and why particular women, or women in general, read books, write them, monitor their children’s reading, and otherwise participate in the nation’s literate culture. Even the reviews of British, American and Australian books seem to be written, in more and less definable ways, *for* women readers.

The women’s inflection is hardly surprising, given the magazine’s explicit remit. More unexpected, perhaps, is what I would describe as a sharply polarized perspective on reading. One side of the *Weekly’s* perspective is continuous with the politically progressive, culturally sophisticated, democratic-nationalist attitudes to things like censorship, public libraries, women’s rights, and Australian literature which we associate with the Sydney *Telegraph*, particularly in the latter half of the decade when both publications were owned by Consolidated Press and there was some sharing of staff. It emerges in the *Weekly* through the editorials of George Warnecke, the book reviews and feature articles of Stewart Howard and Les Haylen (most of the unsigned book reviews of the first few years, however, are unsophisticated in the extreme and clearly designed to address the readership revealed in the Letters page), and the reports of the European correspondent Nell Murray.

The other side, at its worst, is socially conservative, morally prudish, culturally naïve, and deeply anglophile. It is a side that reveals itself most consistently in the letters,

written predominantly by women, where the tone is relentlessly polite, formal, respectable, and often painfully self-conscious. The class ambience is what we would usually describe as lower middle class, but I suspect the actual class representation is much wider than that, in both directions. In any case, the letters cover a remarkable variety of topics to do with book-reading as an ordinary part of people's (especially women's) daily lives: reading in bed, reading with meals, idle reading, reading for self-improvement; children and books, lending books, defacing books, fumigating books, building a bookshelf, forming a book club, favourite authors, favourite types of book, and whether novels should come with a synopsis on the spine.

These are not so much topics for debate – debate was increasingly the province rather of the *Weekly's* more pugnacious stablemate, the *Daily Telegraph* – as topics of conversation, and in the course of these conversations differences of opinion were merely registered, not argued out; the typical letter is only 100 words anyway, hardly sufficient to develop and defend a position. The pattern for such conversations – and this also contrasts with the *Telegraph* – is that most of them are initiated by the readers themselves rather than the editors. A typical example is the discussion of “morbid books”, which begins in early 1935 with the following letter from a Mrs Smith of Broken Hill (pen-names had been disallowed by a readers' ballot). She wrote:

The first book that I opened in the circulating library today commenced in this manner:

“Aurelie hung from the ceiling of the kitchen with the rope around her neck and gently swayed in the breeze. She had been dead since dawn
...”

Ugh! Such books might certainly appeal to some people, but it seems to me that, leaving the censor out of the matter, they do not add anything to a world already overfull with sorrow.

Give me the books to cheer me on my way. What do the other readers think? (23 Feb. 1935, p.21)

Two other readers subsequently agreed with her, and another sat on the fence. Their contributions were published in a single column three weeks later in parallel with another, equally animated conversation about breakfast in bed (16 Mar. 1935, p.21). On the same page, another reader proposed that people should compile “happiness scrapbooks” containing cheerful quotations to get them through the day. Yet another tried to start a conversation on what people considered “the most beautiful words in the English language”, a topic that did not fly. There is often this kind of rough thematic congruence within a single issue of the magazine, in addition to the direct exchanges that extend across two and sometimes three issues.

Most of the other book-related topics seem to be spontaneously proposed and batted about in the same leisurely fashion. A few seem to be “planted”, or at least suggested by editorials or articles on public issues such as state library funding and support for Australian books, but even these are quickly absorbed into the more intimate spheres of family, household and neighbourhood concerns.

The overall impression created by the Letters page in the 1930s is of a collection of keen women readers of varied education levels, who have never been part of the public literary culture. Their views on reading are shaped by their generally conservative views on etiquette, morality and family relationships, and they are tentatively and a little nervously testing out the experience of participating in a public print forum – and in the process, perhaps, becoming some kind of loosely-unified national discursive community. Warnecke and Alice Jackson, the two editors of the 1930s, seem to have been happy to allow this process to take its course with a minimum of editorial interventions or cues – perhaps, in Warnecke’s case at least, in a reforming hope that the community might gravitate in time, towards the progressive liberalism of the editorial team – or perhaps just to maximize sales. The title of the Letters page until the early 1940s, “So They Say”, seems to signify this arm’s length policy: the letter-writers are a “they”, not a “we” or even a “you”. It is only during the War years that the notional community of the Letters page draws close enough to the editorial team (or they to it) to be directly addressed – at which point the title of the page becomes “What’s On your Mind”.

“Good books” and “good reading” are defined mainly by negation by the *Weekly’s* correspondents: they are what “light fiction” is not, where that term refers mainly to romantic novels and detective fiction, both of which are generally disapproved of, for somewhat different reasons (and both of which, somewhat ironically, appeared regularly in the *Weekly’s* own fiction pages). “Good books” could also be defined, informally and implicitly, as the books that should be owned and kept in the home, for adults to reread and “get to know” (3 Oct. 1936), and more importantly for children to read as they grow up (27 Mar. 1937, 17 April 1937). The emphasis on children as the prime beneficiaries of good reading persists throughout the decade, and one of the *Weekly’s* major book-marketing campaigns was for the single volume *Children’s Treasure House*, a mail-order deal requiring a minimum of ten weeks’ worth of *Women’s Weekly* coupons. It contained “entrancing masterpieces by nearly one hundred of the most famous writers of children’s stories . . . a rich treasure house of [classics] into which the youngest and oldest can dip and find hour upon hour of laughter, happiness and education” (6 July 1935). The advertising copy seems almost to imply that a literary classic is by definition good for children, and indeed several of the named authors – Hardy, Dickens, Scott, and Trollope, for example – are not regarded as children’s authors in any exclusive sense. (Warnecke also bought the Australian rights to the *Treasury of Knowledge*, a similar book offer).

But the *Weekly’s* most distinctive and innovative contribution in the 1930s to “good” – or at least “good-value” – reading (the slippage from “good” to “good value” became

increasingly evident in the course of the decade) was the free full-length lift-out novel. The first of these appeared as a supplement in October 1934, and by 1940 some 250 condensed novels had been published, most of them by contemporary British or American novelists like Warwick Deeping, Edgar Wallace, Pamela Frankau, and Dashiell Hammett, one by Mikhail Sholokhov, and a very few by Australian authors, including Frank Dalby Davison, Henrietta Drake-Brockman and E.V. Timms. Warnecke did, however, see his free novel scheme as a boon for Australian writers, “adding needed impetus to the formation of our own national school of literature” (O’Brien 43–44, *Women’s Weekly* 18 Jan.1936, p.2).

In an opinion paragraph (not a reader’s letter) in 1937, booksellers and librarians are cited as saying that Australians are reading more books – including more “better-class books” – than ever before. “Curiously enough”, the writer observes, “‘Old Man Depression’ is given the credit”:

Thousands of people out of work took up thrillers as a means of escape from the problems of the moment. From that point they progressed to more serious reading, and the book-a-month woman became an addict with a library ticket and ideas of her own about books. (14 Aug. 1937)

The first part of the diagnosis, the “escapist” argument, rings true enough; the part about the subsequent (or even consequent?) shift to “serious reading” perhaps somewhat less so, at least for the *Weekly’s* readership. What does seem to have happened is that an *idea* of “good reading” became much more firmly established among that readership, but that it remained a largely *external* notion. The space between the two polarized reading perspectives is therefore partly bridged, but in the ordinary readers’ terms, rather than the editors’. There is little evidence that the *Weekly’s* readers were reading (or rereading) the “old favourites” in the 1930s, even if they were buying, inheriting and shelving them tastefully in their homes (22 Jan.1938). The next, traumatically different decade, however, presents a very different picture.

One of the most important factors in changing Australian readers’ relationship to “good books” in the 1940s may have been the wartime unavailability of much else. Simplistically stated, if the complete Shakespeare is all you have to read, then you’ll read that and probably learn to like it; and all things being equal, you’re more likely to have Shakespeare or the Bible than anything else in an environment where the production of new books is severely curtailed by paper rationing and labour shortages, or where you’re living in barracks (See Garbett, Biggs).

The *Weekly* itself was variously affected by wartime conditions. In 1940 newsprint rationing caused it to discontinue the free novel and reduce the number of pages. It also involved itself heavily in promoting and organizing the collection and distribution of donated books to Australian, and later American, troops through the National Book Council. Both inside and outside the Services, the War functioned as a forcing-house of

familiarization with good books, from Shakespeare and the Bible to Hemingway and Faulkner. People were reading, quoting and discussing the old and the modern classics, not just thinking respectfully about them, and the *Weekly's* literary features in the 1940s reflect this more *internal* relationship to the books themselves.

An article in early 1940, for instance, talks intelligently about the practice of quotation in public speeches, using a famously obscure example in King George's Empire speech of that year as a starting point (3 Feb. 1940).² Another article quotes a series of famous literary marriage proposals, from the works of Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, Somerset Maugham and others (26 Aug. 1944). Writers themselves, both past and present, begin to be subjects of interest. Stories about Dickens abound (16 Nov. 1946, 19 Feb. 1949), and in 1949 a monthly series of biographical articles on "Famous Women" begins with George Eliot and concludes, nine months and nine women writers later, with Harriet Beecher Stowe.³ Three months later a new series called "Poets in Private" publishes the first of nine domestic biographies of poets, all of them dead white males with one interesting exception, Dorothy Parker (then alive as well as female).

What both these latter series have in common is an interest in the writer-as-hero – exposing hidden evils, resisting tyranny, righting public wrongs, telling the truth to power or merely defying current social conventions. The chronological development of the theme is framed neatly by Les Haylen's review of John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* in 1940 and an unsigned review of Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country* in 1949. Both reviews see the modern novel as an instrument of radical social revelation, and the modern writer as a reforming intellectual – much the same image of the writer as we find in the then new, and very differently targeted publication *Meanjin*. It is as if the democratic idea of the writer-as-social-intellectual, nurtured in the womb of 1940s radical nationalism, had managed to insinuate itself into the complacent "ordinary reading" community of the *Women's Weekly*. And its main effect on the chatty, conservative booklovers of the previous decade, interestingly enough, was to silence them. There are very few readers' letters about books in the 1940s, and those few seem to evince the same democratic-nationalist attitudes as the liberal-progressive remainder of the magazine: calls for wider distribution of good literature to schoolchildren through mobile libraries and dramatic productions; calls to donate inscribed books to honour the war dead.

That pre-war community of naïve booklovers never quite re-formed, but through the first post-war decade new forms of interactivity began to develop. For example, as the series on famous poets' private lives ended, in December 1950, an even longer series called "My Favourite Poem" commenced, in which readers simply sent in their favourite short poem or excerpt. The poets chosen (though not always the poems) are notable for what we would now call their canonicity: in fact they are all Romantic and Victorian classics. When that series ends, in mid 1951, there are quizzes to identify famous literary characters. Even when readers are not themselves interacting with the classics, the magazine does it for them, illustrating their contemporary relevance, for example, by placing passages of Shakespearean advice next to photographs of modern lovers;

locating a piece of modern slang in a Trollope novel; quoting T.S. Eliot in a paragraph on inflation and power stoppages, and Byron in a mistily romantic shampoo ad.

Good literature was becoming ever more closely intertwined with the good life for the *Weekly* and its readers in the early 1950s, and the magazine encouraged, facilitated and modelled that conjunction in a variety of ways; with reports on events like the 3rd five-day Shakespeare Festival in Swan Hill Victoria in April 1952, featuring several theatrical productions and a variety of other Shakespearean activities. It was funded by the Town Council, who said they were “keen for our cultural progress to keep abreast of our material riches” (30 April 1952, p.21).

The new book reviewer at this time, Ainslie Baker, a well-read and sophisticated critic, compiled Christmas gift lists of books, both classic and contemporary, with incisive commentaries useful for directing them towards particular categories of readers. The free lift-out novel returned in July 1952, not contemporary fiction this time, hot off the British or American press, but a 25 year old American classic, *The Great Gatsby*, heralded by an unsigned article on Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, perhaps by Baker, announcing an international revival of interest in their lives and work. Baker’s reviews embody a shift of interest towards the classic works, and she often explicitly addresses “the critical reader”, sometimes even warning her off particular books (4 Nov. 1953, p.2).

Probably the most important new development, however, from the “good reading” perspective, was Dorothy Drain’s column, “It Seems to Me”. It began in 1947 and lasted until 1963, but throughout the decade of the 1950s she was the *Weekly*’s most popular and recognized writer, eventually succeeding Esmé Fenston as Editor in the early 1970s. In her column, Drain was a strong advocate for the “great writers”, but she was also clearly fascinated by the ironies and paradoxes that attended their modern reception, and by their complex relations with popular fiction and with the radio. She reflects frequently, for example, on the rise and fall of popular genres like detective and science fiction, and on the academic “slumming” of university professors like J.I.M. Stewart (a.k.a. Michael Innes) who read and even wrote pulp fiction. Herself somewhat drawn to science fiction, she refuses to listen to it on the radio until after the Dickens reading: “Being so familiar with *David Copperfield*”, she writes, “I am able to start crying as soon as an appropriate episode starts, which makes it very restful” (18 April 1954). Her continuing response to the place of the classics in middle-class Australia from the late 1940s to the early 1960s is a rich repository of Australian reading history.

The big new theme of the 1950s, in Australia as elsewhere, was the “youth problem”, and the *Weekly* engaged with it in a number of ways: with the long-lasting American comic strip “Teena” from 1949, with a picture-story series modelling appropriate social behaviour for young men and women, with a monthly “teenage issue” from 1955 and, from 1959, with a lift-out supplement, “Teenagers Weekly”. The teenage issues ran several targeted features, including a column of ““know-how” for teenagers” (hints on Beauty, Charm and Health, from Kerry Hill) and a standing invitation to teenage writers to submit “short short stories” of 1500–1800 words. Some teenage writers mis-

takenly thought it was a competition – an excusable error, as the Ipana Junior Writers Contest (which apparently required Ipana Toothpaste to figure in the denouement) was running concurrently. The staff reader was not inclined to be understanding about it (“They have quite the wrong idea”), and was far from indulgent (or even helpful) in the critical feedback she provided to the half-dozen writers each month deemed “worthy of comment” (16 Feb. 1955; 16 March 1955). A tone of didactic asperity is fairly typical of the Teenage Section in these years, suggesting perhaps that the *Weekly’s* recognition of the teenager as an important new social category was not yet matched by a corresponding capacity to empathise with real teenagers.

Throughout the 1950s, good reading was promoted as part of a strategy for civilizing an unruly younger generation and re-integrating them into the wider community. Perhaps it was no accident that the “Famous Women” series nearly always occupied the same page as “Teena”. But the magazine was prepared to acknowledge youthful resistance to the campaign. In March 1954, for example, J. Doubleday of St Leonards wrote:

My father is the end. He is always putting me in my place and now he says I am not to read the comic strips in the papers. I asked him why and he said that only morons read strips and to be interested in them shows that I have a very low mentality. You should hear him. He has also banned radio serials and the latest is reading Jane Austen aloud to improve my mind till the symphony broadcast starts . . . (31 March 1954)

Five months later, the weekly showed where its allegiance lay. “Books,” Esmé Fenston proclaimed in a Children’s Book Week editorial, “are everyone’s best friends.” She went on:

Today books often appear to be neglected – the mental effort of reading print is too great in an era of comic picture books, television and voices commanded by a radio switch. Balloons in comic strips and radio serials are poor substitutes for the richness that exists between the covers of great books. Youth misses a great heritage if its reading education is neglected. (18 Aug. 1954)

The *Weekly’s* promotion of good reading moved into its final phases in this period. As early as 1949 it reported the formation of the “Great Books Club” in America. This was an organization established by Robert Hutchins and Mortimer Adler of the University of Chicago in the 1940s, essentially to encourage people to read the classics and form discussion groups to talk about them. It was taken up in Australia by the Australian-American Association – a postwar stamping-ground of Frank Packer’s (Griffen-Foley 151), and boosted with a recycled American anecdote, hinting none-too-subtly at the ideological subtext:

Mrs Lampard [of the Australian-American Association] told the story about a member of the board of directors of a big Chicago factory who called at the works at lunchtime.

Seeing heads diligently bent over books he said jovially, "Ah, I see you are boning up on your union laws".

"No," the employees told him. "We are reading Confucius". (12 March 1949)

(It was, after all, 1949, the year of the National Coal Strike, and Frank Packer's *Weekly* was unlikely to miss an opportunity for a dig at militant unionism).

A year later there was a follow-up story about an Australian war bride becoming a Great Books discussion group leader in Milwaukee (25 Feb. 1950); but although the enterprise continues to prosper in America (and has had a big resurgence in recent years), it seems never to have caught on in Australia, despite the *Weekly's* best efforts, and the magazine apparently abandoned its campaign shortly thereafter.

It did, however, lend its active support to a much more unusual scheme for attracting the youth of the nation to great literature: the "Peter Mitchell Will Quest". In 1921, a wealthy grazier, Peter Stuckey Mitchell, of Bringenbrong near Albury, died at the age of 64, convinced of the need to "do something" for young Australians. Thirty-three years later, in April 1954, his widow died and it was then revealed that Mitchell had left her an amount in trust that had since grown to a quarter of a million pounds. The will directed that after her death the net income should be awarded through a series of periodical competitions as prizes to fifteen unmarried women under the age of 30, ten youths under 21, and an equivalent number of soldiers, sailors and police. Candidates for the awards, which ranged in value from £500 to £60, were required to study a set list of books, comprising Peter Mitchell's favourite classics, ranging from the "Protestant Bible" through Shakespeare, Cervantes, Scott, Dickens, Thackeray and others, to Kipling and Conan Doyle. The *Weekly* undertook to organize the quests, and the first of them (for the women) culminated in March 1955 in a week's visit to Sydney for the 23 finalists, where they toured the beaches in a double-decker bus, went to an opera, met Johnny Ray in person, and received their prizes (23 March 1955, pp.20–21).

What the Mitchell Will Quest did for young Australians or their familiarity with the classics is unclear; certainly it is hard not to feel uneasy at the mix of eugenicism and religious sectarianism in the text of the Will (to say nothing of the sexism and imperialism). But the *Weekly* also put its weight, then and later, behind less eccentric reading campaigns. For four months in 1961, for example, it published a weekly series of articles entitled "The Lifetime Reading Plan", introduced by the American critic and broadcaster Clifton Fadiman (12 April 1961 – 23 Aug. 1961). These were introductory essays on the "Great works of Western Civilisation", from Homer and the Greeks, through Shakespeare and Milton, Rousseau and Wordsworth, Marx and Tolstoy, to T.S. Eliot and William Faulkner. The aim was not to present a self-contained course of study, but

to stimulate readers' desire to buy or borrow the original books, and to read and reread them for the rest of their lives. The series was connected with the Chicago-based Great Books Foundation, mentioned earlier, and was presumably bought as a package from Encyclopaedia Britannica, which had now taken over as the publishing arm of the Foundation. Britannica published and provided some limited Australian distribution for the *Great Books of the Western World*, an expensive 55-volume set that serviced the Lifetime Plan directly.

In 1967, in what may have been an attempt to provide its readers with a more affordable option for their self-education in the classics, the *Weekly* began promotion of the Literary Heritage Collection, a 40-volume matched set of classics, published by Heron Books in the UK, to be sent to subscribers, one a month, following an initial welcoming gift of a four-volume complete Shakespeare for \$1.95 – an idea pioneered in the United States (and since picked up by several other publishers, including Folio). The books in the Heritage Collection, however, were not marketed as “tools of self-discovery” (Fadiman’s term for the Great Books), but – with arresting blatancy – as instruments of social advancement:

The deep blue grained Kivar bindings, set off by gleaming gold decorations, are similar in appearance to precious books found in museums and libraries of the very wealthy, printed on fine quality paper . . . they form a lifetime collection proclaiming your good taste as a decorator and your discernment as a reader. (21 June 1967)

By the late 1960s, it seems, the *Weekly's* postwar enthusiasm for promoting the reading of the classics had abated and it seems never to have returned. The magazine continued to offer its readers book club memberships (Foyle’s and World Books Club, for example), which catered for contemporary popular fiction and non-fiction; but “reading the classics” was no longer the *Weekly's* business. In retrospect, the good-reading aspirations it was articulating and promoting in the 1950s might be seen as both a carryover of the intense interest in reading generated by the War and at the same time as a “managing strategy” designed to divert that intensity into reading that was less threatening to the Establishment. Like many other aspects of the *Women's Weekly*, perhaps, its promotion of good reading was thus both genuinely civilizing and ideologically conservative.

Endnotes

1. The cheapness or otherwise of the private lending (or circulating) libraries in the 1930s is a slightly contentious question. John Arnold asserts that reading, “at 3d a week for a book at the corner library”, was “a cheap form of entertainment” (72), but the *Weekly* apparently did not agree (8 April 1939, p.19; see also “Editorial: Australians and Their Libraries”, 17 October 1936). The history of the Carnegie

Libraries in Australia is, as far as I know, yet to be written.

2. The King quoted as follows: "I said to the man who stood the gate of the years: 'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.' And he replied: 'Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than any light, and safer than a known way.'" The lines were written by Miss M.L [Molly] Haskins, of Crowborough, Sussex, England, in 1912.
3. The full list is "George Eliot", 22 Oct. 1949; "Aphra Behn", 19 Nov. 1949; "Mary Shelley", 7 Jan. 1950; "Anne Hathaway", 28 Jan. 1950; "Elizabeth Barrett Browning", 11 March 1950; "Marie Louise Rame" ("Ouida"), 29 April 1950; "George Sand", 6 May 1950; "Lady Blessington", 20 May 1950; "Harriet Beecher Stowe", 1 July 1950.

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