

# Reviews

**Patrick Buckridge and Belinda McKay, eds. *By the Book: A Literary History of Queensland*. St Lucia: U of Queensland P, 2007, 390pp.**

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The editors of this admirable book are curiously diffident in their Introduction about the task that they and their ten other contributing authors have completed so well. Recognising a certain hesitancy among Australian intellectuals about identification with one of the states or territories over national or global recognition, the editors have been careful to avoid barracking too loudly for the home team—though State of Origin football is mentioned. Despite the hesitancy, the authors of *By the Book* have produced an accessible, informative and often thought-provoking series of interlinked studies of a state whose reputation is now established as a home base for enormous literary creativity.

The core business of a literary history of a state or region is the production of a scholarly and reasonably comprehensive exposition of books and writers in their historical, cultural and geographic contexts. Different emphases may place the spotlight differently. A striking (and courageous) feature of *By the Book* is the attention it gives to place—as physical geography, literary representation and as cultural sites where the contexts of possibility are enhanced or diminished for writers. While generally avoiding determinism, the chapters of this book show that where we live, breathe and interact with others often does affect what we think, imagine and write. The architecture of *By the Book* is a logical extension of their view, fitting its various narratives and observations into sections on South-East Queensland, Central Queensland, Western Queensland and North Queensland. The demographic decentralisation of human settlement in Queensland supports this approach. When “statewide themes” are addressed in the final section of the book under the headings of indigenous writing, children’s literature and travel writing, the powerful role of place in the lives of authors and their works is further exemplified.

Philip Neilsen’s chapter on children’s literature summarises some of these tendencies. Neilsen writes of Queensland as “a geographic and mythic site”.

Eschewing a fully comprehensive, bibliographically dominated approach thanks to previous work by Brenda Niall, Marcie Muir and Kerry White, Neilsen explores the main representations of Queensland under three “geographic sites—the reef, the bush and the city”. This approach may seem reductive of some of the more complex works (for example by Garry Crew) but it does highlight the geographic features that have attracted many storytellers.

Similarly, the book’s concluding chapter by Simon Ryan and Patrick Buckridge on travel-writing in Queensland documents the continuing appeal of “images of endless beaches and dense rainforests” in guidebooks and travel brochures reinforced by “discourses of northern peculiarity, as the home of redneck reactionaries and gun nuts, as well as crocodiles, dolphins and cane toads”. Ryan and Buckridge adapt Edward Said’s argument in *Orientalism* to indicate how thoroughly “textualised” a place may become by such insistently promoted exotica. Landscape nevertheless endures (for the most part) and the book’s concluding section returns to substantial exponents of travel-writing such as Jean Devanny, Gerard Lee and the Western Australian travel-writer and critic John K. Ewers.

North Queensland writing might be expected to contribute most to these notions of difference. Cheryl Taylor and the late Elizabeth Perkins do in fact describe their region as a “character” in much of the writing. They argue that the North Queensland climate, landscape, distances and sparse settlement determine the “physical and psychic lifestyles of its people”. The argument cannot be carried by this chapter alone however because indigenous writing is analysed in a separate chapter by Maggie Nolan. Nevertheless a composite, larger-than-life character does emerge from explorers’ narratives, pioneering and travellers’ tales, the remarkable eco-critical writings of E. J. Banfield and three literary giants of the region Xavier Herbert, Thea Astley and Janette Turner Hospital.

Literary traditions and conventions in Queensland, as in other states, are fed (but not totally sustained) by interstate and international trade in these commodities. Thus Denis Cryle’s chapter on central Queensland writing contends that the prevailing “bush ethos [. . .] both precedes and extends beyond the period of the *Bulletin* ethos from the 1890s to the Second World War”. The “city bushmen” of Sydney and Melbourne are thus only a partial influence; local experience often provides “a starting point for a more original expression of local and regional identities”. Cryle notes the prevalence of frontier violence from a white perspective in ballads from George Vowles and Alexander Forbes to Merv Lilley. Among the women writers of “station

literature”, Cryle rediscovers the talented poet Lala Fisher (1872-1929) who lived first in Charters Towers and then Sydney before transferring to London where she became an important player in the expatriate Australian literary scene with the Patchett Martins, Douglas Sladen and others. While showing the extension of *Bulletin*-style masculinity and mateship to the cane-fields, fishing industry and meatworks, Cryle also revives for consideration the Rockhampton School. This “bookish culture” in the early twentieth century is a reminder of the way prophets and proponents of “high culture” have sprung up and persisted beyond Australia’s capital cities. In more recent times the Central Queensland University Press has also played an important role as a regional press encouraging both traditional and experimental writing.

Many “wests” have been mythologised in Australian writing. Queensland’s west, as Robin Trotter and Belinda McKay show, is characterised by its remoteness. George Essex Evans’s “The Women of the West” sets an heroic tone with its song of praise for “the hearts that made the nation”. More successful in its national claims was “Banjo” Paterson’s “Waltzing Matilda” written at Dagworth station near Winton. Another contender for “real Australia” status is Ernest Favenc’s stark tales of the inland deserts but they lack the ostentatious drama of Essex Evans’s romanticised women or Paterson’s feckless swagman. Ongoing storytelling in the region is characterised by the genial but satiric “Cunnamulla storyteller”, Herb Wharton, who is also discussed briefly in Maggie Nolan’s chapter on indigenous writers and writing. Like Jack Davis in Australia’s far West, Wharton has a real flair for anecdotal storytelling with a punch.

Herb Wharton has characterised Brisbane as home to the god of Mammon but Buckridge’s chapter on Brisbane and literature from 1859 to 1975 and Todd Barr and Rodney Sullivan’s extension of the story to 2001 show why this particular city has played a large role on the national literary scene. Buckridge’s tone is measured, witty and eloquent as he considers the “roles for writers” made possible by this city. He contrasts the “highly distinct and distinctive” identity enjoyed by Brisbane since the mid-1970s with a much more precarious sense of communal purpose in an earlier era summarised in the jostling images of: “penal settlement, frontier outpost, busy port, advance-guard of socialism, cultural backwater, international military headquarters, hive of political reaction, home of the literary avant-garde”.

Buckridge’s Brisbane is a city of poets. A hole in his chapter, and in the book more generally, is the absence of theatre and drama. Nevertheless a focus on poetry has some benefits in allowing insights and images to be illustrated succinctly. From James Brunton Stephens and the “manly bohemianism” of

the Johnsonian Club (founded in 1878), Buckridge takes his readers on a tour through the verse of Mary Hannay Foott—the first woman to make a living as a professional writer in Brisbane—to the verse of William Baylebridge, Clem and Nina Christesen, John Blight, Val Vallis, David Rowbotham and Judith Wright. He notes (with a hint of regret?) the cultural authority once held by John Manifold and the “Old Left” in Brisbane literary circles in the 1950s and the influence in the 1960s and beyond of Tom Shapcott and Rodney Hall on what he calls the “new writing” ethos. A second black hole appears though in the strange omission of Peter Porter and the marginal role accorded to Gwen Harwood. Porter’s marvellous poetic renditions of suburban Brisbane and his contribution to debates about city versus country models would have enriched this chapter.

The expressive chapter titles in *By the Book* introduce their own narrative. Thus “An Unlikely City: The Making of Literary Brisbane, 1975-2001” by Barr and Sullivan announces a coming-of-age from unlikely beginnings. This is only half the story, of course, as Buckridge’s previous chapter demonstrates. But “arrival” of an important literary kind does occur with David Malouf’s *Johnno* (1975) and *12 Edmondstone Street* (1985). The authors then produce a neat set of opposing perspectives: Brisbane is presented variously as a city to “escape”, “remember”, “accuse” and “acclaim”. The latter perspective seems more possible after the “culturally repressive” Bjelke-Petersen state government in the 1970s and 80s. The parameters of an interesting argument about an “intact” versus a fragmented literary culture are introduced but not pursued. It may be invidious to compare the quality of work by writers who “stayed” and those who “left” Brisbane but expatriates such as Porter, Jessica Anderson, Thea Astley and Janette Turner Hospital never left their Queensland lives behind; like James Joyce in Europe, they fed imaginatively on memories of their homeland. Conveniently though, homegrown talents like Nick Earls and Andrew McGahan show a capacity to both live in and reimagine Brisbane in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

In the spirit of decentralisation encouraged by the editors of *By the Bush*, this review began with peripheries before moving to the metropolis. That impetus drives us out beyond Brisbane again to its hinterland. Here Belinda McKay is an observant guide pointing out remarkable examples of the literature of place in work by Rosa Praed, Vance and Nettie Palmer, Judith Wright and Oodgeroo. “The place has become part of us”, wrote Nettie Palmer of Caloundra, the setting of Vance Palmer’s haunting novel *The Passage* (1930). For Oodgeroo on Stradbroke Island, “the past is all about us and within” and she names herself after the paperbark trees that lead her back to “the old Dreamtime”.

Also out beyond Brisbane are the Darling Downs and Toowoomba where Christopher Lee is a perceptive and interesting guide. The major literary talents of this region are Steele Rudd and Bruce Dawe—the small selector on the Downs and the suburb-dweller of Toowoomba. Lee describes the Geelong-born Dawe as “an itinerant who ultimately found home and family in a regional culture”, yet he was “wary of the narrow parochialism and insularity of [this] stay-at-home culture”. When Dawe retired from the Darling Downs Institute of Advanced Education in 1993 he had lived in Toowoomba for thirty years and might have been thought a local, though he remained something of a renegade corpuscle in the town’s bloodstream. Lee guides us also to the Ladies’ Literary Society of Toowoomba and the neglected work of Dorothy Cottrell, Margaret Trist and the luminous (but strangely neglected) poetry of Jean Kent. At the end of his tour, with a flourish, he recommends Andrew McGahan’s novel *The White Earth* (2004) as “the single most important literary work about the region”.

*By the Book* is full of rich pickings. Not since Peter Pierce’s *Oxford Literary Guide to Australia* (1987) have we had such an authoritative re-examination of the relationship between literature and place. In setting this benchmark, the editors and authors of *By the Book* challenge scholars to produce new high quality works of state and regional literary history.

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