

Reviews

A Companion to Australian Literature Since 1900. Ed. Nicholas Birns and Rebecca McNeer. Rochester, New York; Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: Camden House, 2007, 477pp.
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This is a large and very handsome volume and it's good to see Australian literature figuring in the Camden *Companion* series. In addition, the volume is edited by two American scholars, who bring an outsider perspective to the idea of Australian literature, and while slightly more than half the contributors are writing from an Australian context, fourteen are situated outside it. There are some fresh perspectives here and they offer—both from the inside and the outside—sometimes surprising insights, making this history distinctive and setting it apart from the several such volumes edited in Australia. The beautiful cover of this *Companion* uses John Olsen's evocative landscape painting, *Road to Hill End, Monkey Hill*. It defies, as the Note on the Cover points out, 'oppositions between the modernist and the figurative, realism and the avant-garde'. These familiar oppositions are avoided in the volume too, which constructs its narrative of twentieth-century Australian literature even-handedly and openly, seeking to give value to what are often seen as minority writing groups or genres as well as the more familiar.

The volume begins with a brief 'Chronology of Main Events in Australian History, 1901-2005'. The first events cited are the establishment of the Commonwealth of Australia and the legal enactment of the Immigration Restriction Act and the last, ironically, the Cronulla riots and the racial violence they seemed impelled by and resulted in. Such choices indicate the attempt of this volume to construct an alternative (literary) history. The 'Chronology' includes information such as the foundation dates of the major literary journals and Associations of Australian literature, at least the Australian and American ones, perhaps not to be seen as 'main events' in Australian history but useful to have here. In its structure, the volume challenges chronological and teleological thinking: the five section titles are 'Identities', 'Writing Across Time', 'International Reputations', 'Writers and Regions', and 'Beyond the Canon'. As does the 'Chronology', they signal a broad, often questioning approach.

The Introduction refers to the volume's interests, which are other than those of more traditional, dominant histories. Its 'vantage point' is different from what it sees as the often 'self-congratulatory perspective' based on a 'metaphor of emergence' (1) that has more usually been adopted in discussions of Australian literary history. It argues that the idea that the visibility and consolidation of Australian literature occurred around the time when Patrick White won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1973, and Australian writers began to be recognised outside Australia, obscures what is a productive history of literary writing preceding that time. Its focus is on the diversity of the literary landscapes it surveys, but does not presume to authorise, with their multiple possibilities. It notices the peculiar situation of Australian literature throughout the twentieth-century, which suffered initially from a sense of its colonialism, where Australian writers were dismissed as and often felt themselves 'derivative and second-rate' (4), a status which, paradoxically, freed writers from dependence on a metropolis. It was then noticed and marketed through its 'Australianness', while late in the twentieth-century increasing cosmopolitanism meant that niche was no longer so available.

Thus the volume's approach to a national literary history is broad and contextual—'metonymic, rather than synecdochic' (12)—and it seeks to give voice through the varied chapters to the 'long history and multivalent contexts of Australian cultural institutions' (7). This claim is borne out in many of the individual chapters. The first two deal with the constitution of Aboriginal identity and the 'politics of [its] representation' (17). Both chapters, the first by Ali Gumillya Baker and Gus Worby on 'Writing, Politics, and Art', the second on Indigenous writers by Anita Heiss, acknowledge the significance of oral expression, of story telling, dance, visual art, film and so on, as well as of more conventional written work, in that politics. And both emphasise that Aboriginality is a colonial construct. Heiss confronts this issue as she begins her chapter: 'There weren't any Aborigines in Australia before invasion. There were simply people . . .' (41). These chapters, like others, are relatively succinct but offer an enormous amount of information.

Other 'Identities' dealt with in this first section are national, multicultural, Jewish, Asian-Australian, identity in literary hoaxes, and women. Each chapter, in different ways, traces and infers a space that Tanya Dalziell, musing on the meanings of the term 'women's writing' in her chapter, suggests might be one which is 'multiple and shifting . . . [where] allegiances of belonging, or not, to place are complicated (by history, by colonialism, by migration, by affective ties, by gender)' (149). In a further take on what must be understood as 'the problematic notion of identity', Marguerite Nolan, writing on Australian

literary hoaxes, urges understandings of such events as 'limit cases in relation to that . . . notion' (135). Questions about why these cases occasion so much public interest and debate in Australia brings her to conclude that they are 'urgent and unsettling because they call the certainty of all our identities into question' (136), leading us perhaps to engage with Dalziell's complicated, multiple space of Australian identities.

Globalisation and its effects on Australian literature, both in the ways this larger context may influence writing and reading but also in the major shifts that have taken place in publishing and marketing, is taken up in several of the essays. Nicholas Birns, writing on the work of Australian poets born between 1901 and 1935, 'Slessor's generation' (188), discusses the poetry of that period in terms of its place in the world. While it did not then enjoy what he calls an 'efficient market' (172) outside Australia, experimental poetry was being written and modernist forms and ideas engaged with. This strong and very informative chapter is matched by David McCooney's on poetry of the latter part of the century, similarly energetic and wide-ranging as it describes a period 'marked by marginality *and* abundant forms of poetic renewal' (203). In the first of her two chapters on Australian drama, Maryrose Casey places the drama of 1900-1970 in the context of Australia's social and political life, and explodes the myth that this period was a 'largely empty [dramatic] landscape', marked by occasional 'isolated renaissances' (207), and framed by Louis Esson and the Pioneer Players in the 1920s and Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* in the mid-1950s. She uncovers a 'rich and varied field' (207) of numerous dramatists, performances, little theatres and companies. Her second chapter establishes the more commercial, professional context available for Australian drama from the late 1960s, when a system of subsidies was made available to the performing arts. As in North America and Europe, an alternative 'new wave' theatre arose. At this time too Indigenous playwrights brought their people's stories to the commercial stage.

Any list opens up the possibility of alternatives; this danger is one invited by the section 'International Reputations', which includes essays on Christina Stead, Patrick White, David Malouf, Les Murray, Peter Carey and Gerald Murnane. However, that the well-informed American editors consider these are best known Australian writers overseas is in itself interesting. Most essays in this section adopt a bio-critical approach and all offer insights into the writers' major place in Australian literature and solid arguments for their reputations. The section on writers and their regions I find less satisfactory. There seems to be no overriding attention to the idea of the regional, itself a difficult one which has been widely debated, and while most individual chapters 'place'

their writer or writers, that placing is not often central to the discussion of the writing. The final section is particularly interesting, ranging across science fiction, popular writing, film, children's literature, environmental themes, and gay and lesbian writing. Each chapter necessarily works as a survey but also provides a critical map for its field. All are valuable, giving attention to areas not always included in literary histories. Writing on environmental themes in Australian writing, Gary Clark brings new knowledges from the ecological sciences to a reading practice that moves away from what is a well-established attention to landscape and place. He suggests that a 'scholarly reframing of Australian literary history from an eco-critical perspective' would revitalise discussion of the 'constant presence' (440) of landscape and place in that literature. The theoretically acute final chapter by Damien Barlow and Leigh Dale is similarly suggestive. By sketching the volatile field of gay and lesbian writing, it demonstrates that 'queer readings, like queer writings . . . remain in creative tension with dominant cultural values and forms' (454).

It is pernicious but perhaps inevitable that reviewing such a large volume with so many individual contributors means that only a few will be singled out. This should not be understood to detract from the worth of others. This is a fine book, beautifully edited, readable and full of interest. Scholarly and lively, this *Companion* should be widely used.

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