

William Hatherell. *The Third Metropolis: Imagining Brisbane through Art and Literature 1940-1970.* St Lucia: U of Queensland P, 2007, 312pp.

ISBN: 9780702235436

AU\$45

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Todd Barr and Rodney Sullivan. *Words to Walk By: Exploring Literary Brisbane.* St Lucia: U of Queensland P, 2005, 225pp.

ISBN: 070223572

AU\$19.95

<http://www.uqp.uq.edu.au>

These two books testify in their different ways to the previously unremarked depth and richness of the literary and artistic heritage of Australia's third city, Brisbane. As William Hatherell points out, in the middle decades of the last century the Queensland capital was customarily seen as a big country town, without culture or sophistication, from which young writers and artists escaped to the seemingly more cultured centres of Sydney or Melbourne, or better still to London and Europe. The long political reign of Joh Bjelke-Petersen contributed to the longevity of the perception, especially south of the border, that the state and its capital were populated by uneducated rednecks indifferent to all things intellectual and cultural. Times have changed, however, both economically and culturally. Queensland and Western Australia are sustaining the national economy in difficult times, and the political centre of gravity has travelled north, with Queenslanders occupying key national positions. Accompanying these economic and political changes is a new and welcome confidence in the value of exploring and documenting the real cultural history of the state and its capital. The picture that emerges from these two books is intriguingly different from the traditional perception of Brisbane as a cultural backwater.

Todd Barr and Rodney Sullivan's *Words to Walk By* is a tour guide to the literary landmarks of the city: 'This is a book for walking around Literary Brisbane [. . .] visiting the places where writers once lived, and looking at their homes, city buildings and landscapes that inspired their work.' The twenty-five walks begin in the city centre and move out through the inner suburbs to the coast at Wynnum in the south and Redcliffe in the north. Writers whose homes and haunts are described include David Malouf, Thea Astley, Janette Turner Hospital, John Manifold, Thomas Shapcott, Rhyll McMaster and Andrew McGahan, to name just a few. Each walk begins with a brief account

of the 'Literary Significance' of the area, followed by detailed directions and concise, informative details, often quoting the authors' own descriptions of their houses and localities. While the research is meticulous, the tone is relaxed and engaging, and the result is a treasure trove of literary associations, an invaluable *vade mecum* for locals and visitors alike with the time to explore the city that so many notable writers experienced and reflected on in their works.

William Hatherell's *The Third Metropolis* is a cultural history of Brisbane during the middle three decades of the twentieth century, which he sees as a formative period in the city's development from a big country town into an artistic metropolis. The book began life as a doctoral thesis and retains many of the virtues of an academic study, delineating clearly and precisely why the period 1940-1970 was chosen, what kind of cultural history it will attempt, and which art forms will be drawn on as evidence. Its history, he says, 'focuses on "imagining" a city in a particular time through art and literature'. Hatherell's research into this largely unexplored period of the city's cultural life reveals the developments that took place, including the establishment of the Queensland Symphony Orchestra and the founding of the Queensland Ballet, Opera and Theatre Companies, as well as the activities of many smaller, often amateur companies and groups of artists, musicians and theatre performers. Particular attention is paid to the writers who grew up in Brisbane, some of whom returned and all of whom wrote about it. Hatherell sets against this Betty Churcher's description of Brisbane in 1955 as 'a populated rock pool after the tide has gone out', which he sees as a central image of the way in which the city's cultural life was perceived during the period. Churcher's 'rock pool' was the city left behind by the departure in 1945 of the influx of World War Two American servicemen, their withdrawal leaving 'a plethora of brothels, nightclubs, sleazy dance halls, hotel bars [. . .] high and dry and gasping for life in the sub-tropical and staid city'. The other central image is that of the city perceived as a 'cultural desert' inimical to creative activity. The ways in which 'Queensland is different' from the other eastern states, the self-exiling of so many of its creative artists, and their compulsion to return to the city and the state as a creative source and inspiration are themes explored throughout the book.

The mix of textual and contextual analysis is judiciously managed throughout. A chapter offering an overview of the historical, demographic and political forces that shaped the period is followed by a broadly chronological sequence of chapters focused on close readings of individual works of writers and artists. The 1950s, the decade at the heart of the period under study, was, as David

Malouf put it in his 1998 Boyer lectures: ‘the last time [. . .] when most Australians shared the same culture, when there was no significant divide between high and low culture, and none, certainly, between youth culture and the rest’ (6-7). Whether such a golden age actually existed in quite this unity is questioned by Hatherell, but the case is made that the cultures were less divided than they are now, and there was less hostility between them.

The Third Metropolis begins with the 1940s, the decade in which the city was energised by its role in World War Two. Brisbane became the command centre for the Allies’ South Pacific operations, and temporary host to many visiting American and Australian soldiers. This was accompanied by a burst of cultural activity centred on the new literary magazines *Meanjin* and *Barjai*, and the related Miya studio of artists. Later chapters follow the history of people like Clem Christesen and Laurence Collinson who drove those early developments, some of whom stayed in Brisbane, and some of whom left, as Christesen and *Meanjin* did. Among the many writers and artists whose careers are documented in the book are those like Peter Porter who left and stayed away, revisiting only in their writings, those who left, returned on regular visits and wrote compulsively about their Brisbane childhoods, like Janette Turner Hospital, and those who left, wrote extensively about the city and eventually returned to live, like David Malouf. Finally there are those who arrived from elsewhere and stayed, like John Manifold, Ian Fairweather and Jon Molvig.

As Hatherell points out, the *Künstlerroman* was popular with Brisbane-born writers who left to pursue their careers in more congenial climes, and there are perceptive accounts of Thea Astley’s *The Acolyte*, Jessica Anderson’s *Tirra Lirra by the River* and Janette Turner Hospital’s *The Last Magician*. One particularly interesting example of the genre that brings together the literary and artistic strands of this study is David Malouf’s *Harland’s Half Acre*, which draws on the story of Ian Fairweather. After a childhood in England and an adult life wandering through Asia, Fairweather famously settled for a hermit’s life in a hut on Bribie Island, north of Brisbane, where he painted many of his best known works. The chapter devoted to the theme of exile discusses further a number of the writers who left Brisbane as young adults, enjoyed celebrated literary careers, and returned to memories of their childhoods in their writing. As Hatherell notes: ‘The literature of exile and its cousin the literature of nostalgia figure largely in many of the most important retrospective works about Brisbane in the 1940-70 period.’ Among the works examined closely here are poems by Gwen Harwood, Peter Porter and David Malouf, for all of whom exile was a formative experience to which they return repeatedly in

poetry. Their memories were, however, very different. Harwood's Brisbane childhood was a joyous time that she celebrated in generous detail. Porter's remembered childhood was more solitary, and his yearning for the high culture of Europe more intense. Malouf's many accounts of his remembered childhood lie somewhere between Harwood's celebration and Porter's melancholy.

The recovery of this fascinating period of the city's history in *The Third Metropolis* is a welcome contribution to the growing scholarly attention to the cultural past of Brisbane and Queensland, a past too long overshadowed by attention focussed on Sydney and Melbourne. As Thomas Shapcott notes in his Foreword, the University of Queensland Press has long played a vital role in the cultural life of Brisbane, and its continuing support for local writers is evident in the publication of these two valuable and innovative cultural histories. Had it been economically feasible, *The Third Metropolis* might have been enriched by the inclusion of a selection of the paintings it draws on, a number of which are held in the Queensland Art Gallery. As it is, readers of this generously informative and comprehensively documented history might be encouraged to take it to the Gallery and follow its lead in exploring the painters of the period, as the Todd and Sullivan book will guide explorers around the literary sights of Brisbane.

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