

**Studies in
Australian Literary
History**

By Brian Kiernan

*Images of Society and Nature: Seven Essays on
Australian Novels*

Criticism, Australian Writers and Their Work

Henry Lawson, Australian Authors (ed.)

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by Five Major Contemporary Fiction Writers* (ed.)

*Considerations: New Essays on Kenneth Slessor,
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Patrick White

The Essential Henry Lawson (ed.)

David Williamson: A Writer's Career (two editions)

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For Michael Wilding,
Always a stimulating writer of fiction,
scholar, and friend.

Contents

Preface	9
Literature, History and Literary History: Perspectives on the Nineteenth Century in Australia	11
Cultural Transmission and Australian Literature: 1788–1998	29
‘From Mudgee Hills to London Town’: A Critical Biography of Henry Lawson	72
Sydney or the Bush: Some Literary Images	129
A. A. Phillips as Critic	157
Patrick White: Twyborn Moments of Grace	172
Frank Moorhouse: A Retrospective	180
‘The Ways We Live Now’: David Williamson	205
The Advancing Wave: Australian Literary Biography Since 1980	215

Preface

The first essay here, 'Literature, History, and Literary History', was written in the mid-1970s. My impression then was that literary history was regarded, unfairly, as at best a mustily antiquarian pursuit; at worst as a questionable hybrid which attempted to reconcile mundane 'extrinsic' matters of bibliographical and biographical fact with criticism's higher, 'intrinsic' purposes—the interpretation and evaluation of individual poems, fictions and plays.

That general impression changed utterly when *The Oxford History of Australian Literature*, edited by Leonie Kramer, appeared in 1981. Hostile reactions to it, alleging that its 'intrinsic' appraisals of fiction, poetry and drama ignored a range of contexts and other forms of writing, showed that literary history was anything but a musty pursuit to be relegated to a less critically or theoretically aware past. Instead it provided a focus for an otherwise seemingly disparate range of contemporary concerns.

These hostile reactions culminated in a counter-history, *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia*, written by members of the then still fledgling Association for the Study of Australian Literature under the general editorship of Laurie Hergenhan, and published in 1988, the Bicentennial year. This volume (to which I contributed one of the 'contextual' chapters) manifested no anxiety about hybridity—feminist, multicultural and cultural-materialist approaches were prominent among the range of cross-disciplinary interests it incorporated; and, from around the time it appeared, revisionist varieties of literary history became the dominant mode of what used to be called 'literary criticism'.

When the editors of the Sydney Studies series invited me to contribute a selection from the shorter studies I had written over the past twenty years or so years, I thought that a choice from those which related to some variety of literary history might provide a thread through the labyrinth of occasional essays, articles and introductions commissioned by various editors, for different readerships, in Australia, the U.S. and

the U.K. If I have chosen some which seem more preoccupied with individual writers than with wider contexts, then I would appeal to Emerson—‘There is properly no history; only biography’ (*History*, 1841)—and argue, as I do in the last essay here, that literary biography can also be a mode of cultural historiography.