

# The Advancing Wave: Australian Literary Biography Since 1980

'Who left the gate open?' asks Chris Wallace-Crabbe early in his lively chapter on 'Autobiography' in *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia* (1988), 'How did autobiography disguise itself? Or were the rules of the game changed for some clutch of reasons?' He is observing that autobiographies have begun to receive a great deal more critical consideration, at a time when 'the construction of all literary canons has become subject to radical questioning'. Such questioning (not least of the assumed categorical distinction between 'imaginative' and 'non-fictional' prose) has led to the admission of autobiography into the class of 'serious literature', even though the genre he is surveying seems to be a 'parody, or at least a black-and-white caricature' of other literary genres. For while autobiography also claims to refer to life, 'it does so a good deal more crassly', thus raising what he calls 'all those coarse, nagging questions about whether it is art ... or merely documentation.'<sup>1</sup>

*The Penguin New Literary History* itself is clearly intended to contribute to such questioning of canons and neatly demarcated genres, yet it contains no chapter on—nor even discussion of—another form which also claims, however crassly, to refer to life: biography, especially biography of literary subjects. This is a noticeable blind spot in a volume that proclaims itself to be concerned with 'new' perspectives, for an observable development in Australian literary culture over the last decade and more has been interest in the theory and practice of biography, and

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<sup>1</sup> Laurie Hergenhan, ed., *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia* (Penguin, Ringwood, 1988), p.560.

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the admission of literary biography into modes of 'serious' literary and cultural historical discourse.

At the beginning of the 1980s, and then unfashionably, Wallace-Crabbe regretted the lack of biographies of such major writers as Furphy and Lawson, and of such influential figures as Archibald and Stephens.<sup>2</sup> The situation here was then in marked contrast to that in the United States and the United Kingdom, where successive generations, or even decades, were continuing to bring forth new biographies of the perceived major writers, as well as adding new subjects to their literary biographical pantheons. But since the appearance of Axel Clark's *Christopher Brennan* in 1980, a steady succession of full-length, well-researched, and critically considered biographies of major literary figures has provided much of what had been so conspicuously lacking earlier: Sylvia Lawson's *The Archibald Paradox* (1983), Craig Munro's biography of P. R. Stephensen, *Wild Man of Letters* (1984), Gary Kinnane's *George Johnston* (1986), Brian Matthews's *Louisa* (1987), Brenda Niall's *Martin Boyd* (1988), W. Wilde's life of Mary Gilmore, *Courage a Grace* (1988), Chris Williams's *Christina Stead* (1989), Penne Hackforth-Jones's *Barbara Baynton* (1989).

Already the 1990s have seen the publication of the first volume of Axel Clark's *Henry Handel Richardson* and John Barnes's life of Furphy, *The Order of Things* (both 1990); and, among others, Geoffrey Dutton's *Kenneth Slessor*, Colin Roderick's *Henry Lawson* and David Marr's *Patrick White* (all 1991). While deceased figures predominate overwhelmingly as the subjects of 'full-dress' biographies, recent collections of interviews with contemporary writers indicate the reading public's interest in the manifold personal and cultural matters that 'biography' comprehends. Also broadly biographical are David Walker's *Dream and Disillusion* (1976) and Drusilla Modjeska's *Exiles at Home* (1981), both literary and cultural-historical studies that share characteristics of what Leon Edel has termed 'group biography'.

The list I have given does not attempt to be exhaustive, nor can it be up-to-date. Nevertheless, it will serve to make the points that not only have there been many more Australian literary biographies of late, but also that many, if not most, of today's practitioners of this traditional

2 Chris Wallace-Crabbe, 'Australian Literary History', *The Literary Criterion* [Bangalore, India] 15, Nos 3 and 4 (1980), p.141.

form of literary history and criticism are academics. This might invite speculation that the New Critical orthodoxies prevailing within Australian academies in the past may have inhibited the production of literary biographies, though there are earlier examples scattered over time, among them Colin Roderick's life of Rosa Praed, *In Mortal Bondage* (1948), Brian Elliott's *Marcus Clark* (1958), and Ann-Mari Jordens's *The Stenhouse Circle* (1979). However, it is more likely that the 'lead time' between the establishment of courses and postgraduate studies in Australian Literature, combining with the protracted nature of the individual biographical projects, had the effect of masking much of the interest that actually existed before it became so apparent in the 1980s.

Instead of further discouraging academic interest in this once supposedly 'discredited' form, the more theoretical, and sceptical, critical climate prevailing over the past decade has clearly encouraged it, and not only among practitioners. Indications of this are special issues of journals devoted to autobiography and biography, the focus on these genres at the 1989 conference of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature, and the adoption of them by the Humanities Research Centre of the Australian National University as the theme for its programme in 1990. Such interest might seem paradoxical, when the key orthodoxy in the prevailing 'post-structuralist' climate is often assumed to be 'the death of the author'; but, to be consistent, a thorough-going scepticism which assumes no category, even 'Literature', to be 'privileged' is obliged to accept the biographical as another manifestation of 'writing'—and to engage with some theoretical issues. Can precise generic boundaries be drawn between history, biography, fiction? (a question made less abstract, and more provoking, by some recent practitioners in all three genres). If biography is more than 'mere documentation', should it then also be considered aesthetically, as an imaginative construction of characters and events that seeks to confer an aesthetic, ultimately imaginative (but not imaginary) unity and significance on any life's ragged pattern—or lack of pattern?

Axel Clark's *Christopher Brennan* (1981) was first in the wave of Lives of major literary figures that swelled throughout the 1980s and is

maintaining or even gaining momentum. Having its origins in a doctoral thesis, and subtitled *A Critical Biography*, it provides one contemporary model for the literary Life: as a vehicle not only for textual and contextual scholarship but also for closely argued evaluative criticism. However, it still observes the traditions of the genre by presenting a chronologically ordered, narratively interrelated account of Brennan's 'life, times, and work'—as so many nineteenth century biographies announced themselves in their titles or subtitles. But how else would a biographer present his subject?

A life story is what readers traditionally understand by, and expect from, a biography. Yet, although we have read much about *la pacte autobiographique* in recent years—the understanding autobiographers enter into with their readers that, however artful, inventive and imaginative they may be, the Lives they offer are not fictions—the conventions operating between biographers and their readers have not been much considered by critics, though they have been exposed and played with openly by some biographers (and writers of fiction). Perhaps these conventions have not received much theoretical consideration because they are too obvious; but, if so, why do we still read so often those reviews in which the subject of the biography becomes the sole focus of attention, the biography itself remaining unconsidered, invisible as a writing performance, while the reviewer, as one who knew the subject, or whose knowledge might only extend to having read the undiscussed biography, becomes the surrogate authority?

These conventions assume that biographers understand their subjects 'intimately' from their exhaustive researches and that as omniscient narrators (but preferably not obtrusive know-alls) they will present coherently shaped Lives of their central characters, however chaotic the actual lives may have seemed to contemporaries, and even to the subjects themselves. In constructing their chief characters, literary biographers will display the extent and inwardness of their acquaintance with their subjects' writing; for the most significant part of a writer's life—that part which has lead biographers and readers to be interested in the first place—has been lived imaginatively and through the act of writing. Not the facts alone but the biographers' perception of the imaginative import of these facts for their subjects and their subjects' writing becomes the nexus between scholarly or 'mere' documentation and 'criticism'—and, however the latter term might be understood at

this moment, it would seem to involve empathy. John Barnes's teasing out of the elaborate relationship between Joseph Furphy and his fictional alter ego 'Tom Collins', a relationship which culminated in *Such Is Life*, provides a instance of that insightful combination of empathy with an author and an intimate acquaintance with his work that readers expect. Empathy, though, as Colin Rodrick's *Henry Lawson* shows, need not necessarily entail sympathy.

At this crux of life history and criticism there can be links or cross-overs between the two modes of 'the biographical'. If autobiographers often play at being critics by inviting readers to join in mockery of their own quoted juvenilia, biographers often (and perhaps should?) reciprocate by attempting to become vicarious autobiographers: to imagine what it must have been like to grow up in such a family and social setting, have such an education, come to more or less simultaneous consciousness of sexuality and a literary vocation, and (as is so often the case in Australian literary autobiographies) to consciousness, or rejection, of national and class identity. Inevitably, both the *auto-* and the *bio-* versions of this mode of *graphos*, of life-writing, have a succession of overlapping topics which, if they have not been scripted already by the subject as direct or indirect autobiography, can be provided imaginatively by the biographer. These rites of artistic passage offer biographers potential writerly moments, opportunities for infusing documentation and interpretation with a 'literary' element akin to the autobiographer's own—and, in most cases, the biographer has the advantage of rounding off the story by attending (at least vicariously) the autobiographer's final passage and last rite, and by observing posterity's regard, or not, for his or her literary remains.

Axel Clark's pact with his readers—and because, in the Australian context, the appearance of *Christopher Brennan* provided an unprecedented instance of 'critical biography' I want to consider it in what might seem disproportionate detail—is one he shares with the majority of his fellow biographers. That is, the story he tells will posit a significant pattern to the life and work of his subject—a life now dispersed into the heterogeneous collection of texts cited at the end of this *Life*. This pact he fulfils generously, presenting his previously legendary (which also meant cloudy) figure in the overlapping contexts, social-historical,

intellectual and literary-cultural (both national and international) that the manifold sources document. While drawn from, and constrained by, these sources his *Life* is not 'mere documentation' but an interpretative construction that perceives a pattern of consistency in Brennan's life and works where previously a marked, and culturally significant, contradiction had been presumed.

This pattern is announced in the opening paragraph of *Christopher Brennan* (and, as Brian Matthews's *Louisa* demonstrates, openings are significant). By declaring that unlike Henry Lawson, Henry Handel Richardson or John Shaw Neilson, Brennan was not affected by any disturbing experiences or change in his early years, Clark situates his subject within a field of Australian literary biography—though, at the time he was writing, such a field could have been envisaged only fitfully by his readers. Rather than positing any trauma or disruption as central to his subject's development—another implicit situating move, countering the mid-century assumption of Leon Edel and others that 'modern' biography was characterised by its awareness of psychoanalytic insights—Clark's opening proclaims a consistency in Brennan's character in terms of his religious orientation, his desire for the absolute, and his conviction that he was set above the mass of humanity. In the subsequent narrative, and critical exposition, these character traits are made to marry 'naturally' with Brennan's writing, so that his personality and his poetry can be shown as developing together, each illuminating the other.

As readers of literary biography, we recognise that such an assumption of mutuality between the subject's life and work is fundamental to the genre's existence. But clearly this enabling premise, or necessary fiction, runs counter to the orthodoxies of most varieties of criticism this century, from the early T. S. Eliot and New Critical reactions against Romantic expressionist theories to post-structuralist inversions of our seemingly 'common sense' understandings of authors and texts, writing and reading. As always, there are exceptions, and Leavisism with its touchstone of 'sincerity' was an academically influential example; but while Leavisism admitted the biographical by assuming the indivisibility of a writer's 'sensitivity' and expression, its practice was committedly 'literary critical' and primarily directed to evaluative readings of the works. Within the context of academic criticism prevailing in Australia when *Christopher Brennan* was published, its subtitle, *A Critical Biography*, may very

well have appeared to some as anachronistic, if not oxymoronic.

As critical biographer, Clark seeks the sincere expression of personal emotional experience in Brennan's verse—and is most often disappointed. Brennan's models for his versification and diction (and Clark is sharply observant in placing him in the mid-to-late Victorian context) prove unfortunate when 'sincerity', the direct communication of 'felt' or 'authentic' feeling, is the criterion invoked. Few, if any, of Brennan's poems suggest that personal experience is their subject, and even those that might suggest this to the biographically-informed lack immediacy of reference or the sense of a direct expression of emotion. For Clark, the already vexed critical issue of Brennan's diction registers and compounds a deeper problem, that of the unsuitability of Brennan's 'raw material'—his '[T]angled, uncertain (and sometimes transparently immature) feelings'—for such an ambitious Symbolist project as *Poems [1913]*.<sup>3</sup> That is, a more fundamental limitation than Brennan's concealing his 'raw material' behind a screen of Swinburnian or Patmorean verbiage is seen to be his inability to 'contact' his true feelings (p.137).

While it is understandable, indeed expected that a biographer should want to uncover the personal element in the work of his subject, this approach overlooks or dismisses what could be interpreted as Brennan's calculated impersonality, his assumption of archetypal poetic roles, most memorably that of the Wanderer. Clark discerns the personal within the impersonal but then finds this personal element inadequately expressed. He sees the Wanderer, Brennan's major persona in *Poems*, failing in his quest to discover the absolute, as Brennan himself is seen as failing in his personal quest to discover it through poetry. But Clark is not arguing simply that Brennan's work is the failure of Brennan the man (to paraphrase Barthes's dismissive summary of Baudelaire's biographers as crude reductionists<sup>4</sup>). The Wanderer might fail in his quest, but Clark considers 'The Wanderer' and the 'Lilith' sequences to be among Brennan's finest achievements. In them Brennan does not fail as a poet; even though biographically they mark his turning away

3 *Christopher Brennan* (Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1980), p.90. Subsequent page references, included in the text in parentheses, refer to this edition.

4 Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', *Image-Music-Text, Essays Selected and Translated by Stephen Heath* (Hill and Wang, New York, 1977), p.143.

from poetry as his vocation, and their completion coincides with the beginning of his 'slow, terrible descent' (p.175).

Thus, while (with some exceptions) Brennan's verse fails to provide this biographer with sincere expressions of his subject's inner and emotional life, Clark elegantly traces congruities between the life and the work. One might want to quarrel—as one should with any challenging critical argument—with aspects of this congruity. Some, following G. A. Wilkes would see the Wanderer's 'failure' to discover the absolute, and Brennan's similar failure over the course of the cycle, as the realisation of the Romantic ironies implicit in the undertakings of both the poet and his persona, ironies Brennan wrote about in 'German Romanticism: A Progressive Definition'.<sup>5</sup> However, even if one prefers to emphasise those elements that allow a more positive interpretation of the cycle's resolution, the facts obdurately remain: the poet did not sustain an interest in pursuing new versions of his quest and Brennan's personal life began to deteriorate noticeably after 1902. For any reader wanting to qualify Clark's reading of *Poems*, these facts constitute a larger, interpretatively constraining context which cannot easily be dismissed as 'mere', and irrelevant, documentation.

At a time when, in the academies, literary biography seemed to have fallen into an abyss somewhere between the old New Criticism and the new post-structuralism with its scepticism towards author/ity, *Christopher Brennan* demonstrated how this traditional form could still provide an engaging and imaginative focus for scholarship and criticism. The impersonal mode of most of Brennan's verse and the issues relating to his diction justify Clark's extended passages of interpretative and evaluative argument. While these are more concentrated critical discussions than the majority of subsequent literary biographers have felt the need to incorporate, others who have taken a poet as subject also engage closely with the work. With Kenneth Slessor, Geoffrey Dutton similarly confronts the challenge of writing about an elusively impersonal poet and, in this case, of relating his work to an enigmatic and recessive personality. In *Spirit in Exile: Peter Porter and His Poetry*

5 A. R. Chisolm and J. J. Quinn, eds, *The Prose of Christopher Brennan* (Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1962), pp.379–95.

(1991), Bruce Bennett employs a traditional biographical framework, to focus on his subject's work—its characteristics, context and reception—and so provide the fullest consideration Porter's poetry has received so far.

Most biographies, though, have been of prose writers. With George Johnston and Martin Boyd, Gary Kinnane and Brenda Niall were working with subjects whose central works were commonly regarded as 'autobiographical', as unproblematical projections of their creators' experience and personalities. Johnston's David Meredith trilogy parallels the lives of its author and his wife Charmian Clift (who, as a writer herself, doubled Kinnane's subject). Boyd's Langton series follows the outlines of his own family history—and Boyd had also published two autobiographies. What was there for biographers to do with these self-constructed subjects, except create their own versions of what had been provided by the subjects themselves in another genre? Here the spectre of biography's own vicious hermeneutic circle raises itself (as it has in reviewers' minds with studies of Henry Handel Richardson): the biography that is presumably intended to illuminate the life and the works takes for its most substantial evidence the work itself. While their biographies are as different as their subjects, Kinnane and Niall both direct their scholarship and their critical perception to dissociating their subjects from the 'authorised' versions of their lives that readers have formed from their novels. The process could be seen as the opposite of Axel Clark's or Geoffrey Dutton's. Rather than detecting the traces left by the writers' personalities on their impersonal writings, Kinnane and Niall explore the differences between the subjects' actual experiences and their fictional versions of these. They show how these differences have been achieved through such imaginatively reconstructive processes as conflation and substitution.

Brenda Niall makes genealogy—so often a stumbling block for other biographers, or their readers—an appropriate, indeed essential, element for a fuller understanding of Boyd and his works. Her unearthing of a monied convict ancestor, a seemingly unlikely skeleton in the Boyds' vaults, is a scholarly coup to match Kinnane's subtle interpretative surmisals on the processes, not necessarily conscious, by which Johnston transformed his memories into fiction. But in both *George Johnston: A Biography* and *Martin Boyd: A Life*—the indefinite article in each subtitle reminding us of the biographer's own subjectivity—scholarship

and interpretative acumen become, as in Clark's *Brennan*, means to a higher end: not merely the reconstruction of the subject's life, but the construction of 'A Life', a work with characters, settings, scenes, conflicts, in which while every word may be true the overall truth aimed at begins to overlap with some of the expectations that readers bring to fiction. Clearly, as in 'literary autobiography', the qualifier in 'literary biography' can allude not only to the subject but also to the biographer's own narrative skill and other artful qualities. By now we have enough, and sufficiently varied, examples to recognise that biography can not only add to our understanding of writers and writing, and so to 'serious' literary and cultural discourse, but also to the sum total of writing itself.

Equally clearly, the epithet 'literary' also entails some echo of that now seemingly obsolescent phrase 'literary criticism'. In a possibly futile pursuit of a taxonomy, one might be tempted to position Axel Clark's explicitly 'critical biography', or Bruce Bennett's *Spirit in Exile*, at one end of a conjectured spectrum, and at the other a Life of a literary figure that restricts interest in the works to their being—in terms of their composition, publication and reception—simply events in the history of the subject. Happening upon this declaration in the preface to Colin Roderick's *Henry Lawson: A Life*, 'This book does not aim at dealing with his works except insofar as they bear on his personality or his creative method',<sup>6</sup> one might feel that such a test case has been discovered. But restricting interpretation of Lawson's writings in these ways proves not to preclude evaluation of either the subject or his works. As examples, we find Roderick observing of Lawson's 'Brighten's Sister-in-law', which he sees as a prose reworking of the earlier ballad 'Harry the Carrier's Boy', that 'the rewriting of early verse as prose tales had not yet become decadent practice' (p.224); and of *Children of the Bush* that 'The verses ... showed an advance on his earlier verse. In the opening lines of "Unknown" he struck the true note of poetry' (pp.233–34). However external or objective the intended interpretation, an essentially subjective element enters with the biographer's unavoidable assessments of both the work and its producer—and the moral hero of Roderick's Life of Lawson turns out to be the publisher George Robertson.

<sup>6</sup> Colin Roderick, *Henry Lawson: A Life* (Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1991), p.xi. Subsequent page references, included in the text in parentheses, refer to this edition.

David Marr's *Patrick White: A Life* illustrates well the ambivalence with which 'literary' can adhere appraisingly to the execution of a biography as well as descriptively to the subject. Marr begins his story just before Easter 1910, with a plain woman in a big hat standing at the altar for her marriage to Dick White; and like Leon Edel, who found his 'scenic' method for his *The Life of Henry James* (1953–63) in the fictional practices of his subject, Marr continues his narration through vividly presented moments and a style that bear a happy affinity with White's. For his final scene, set almost eighty years after Ruth Withycombe's marriage, he chooses that early morning when Manoly Lascaris and White's literary agent, Barbara Mobbs, scatter the ashes on a lake in Sydney's Centennial Park. The significance of the lake White chose for this rite being 'ringed with a scurf of plastic and broken glass' will not be lost on readers of White's fiction and his autobiography *Flaws in the Glass*, and in its biographical way this scene, which ends with Lascaris and Mobbs turning towards the house to begin another day, Milly the terrier bounding ahead through the grass, is congruent with the conclusions without closure of White's novels.

Marr's narrational procedures in *Patrick White* are 'literary' not only because he, like numerous other biographers, adopts or adapts many of the techniques of fiction, but also because his own biographical imagination is so steeped in the details of his subject's works that (more extensively than White himself in *Flaws in the Glass*, 1981) he can signal to readers of White's work the likely impact on the young Paddy of experiences which will surface as personal preoccupations in the mature Patrick's writings half a century or so later, though without insisting on any deterministic or other interpretive inference. Given the already massive and discordant chorus of commentators on the White canon, Marr wisely does not allow himself to become diverted from his story by the interpretations and evaluations of others, nor does he deliver disquisitions on the works himself; but he provides full and often fascinating details on the inspirations for each work, and details also of their production, reception, and commercial fortune (or lack of it). As with Roderick's *Henry Lawson*, one expects *Patrick White* will stimulate future biocritical studies which will take Marr's researches and emphases as their points of departure.

The consolidation of biography as a respectable mode of literary discourse during a decade when such discourse became a 'site of

contestation' within Australian academies had, as noted previously, its seemingly paradoxical side. The unprecedented appearance of so many literary biographies coincided with the circulation of post-structuralist concepts which, by denying 'bourgeois' individualistic notions of the autonomous (and creative) self, challenged the form's basic assumption that a revealing relationship could be established between a subject's life and work, between life history and imaginative production. While, manifestly, the currency of these concepts did not inhibit writers of literary biographies, it placed them (at least in the minds of many of their readers) in the position of having to validate this enabling assumption through their individual practice—and also to provide their own answers to questions that, in the abstract, seemed vexed: what was 'criticism' and what was its relation to 'biography' in the age of the 'decentred subject'? Their answers, like their practice, proved various, no doubt allowing some readers to see the conventions of the form, or particular biographies, as accommodating their social-constructionist interests in authorship, others as satisfying their traditional critical and literary historical expectations. But at least two literary biographers engaged openly with some of these theoretical questions and issues.

While Sylvia Lawson's *The Archibald Paradox* (1983) follows the familiar contours of a life-history, her subject is 'decentred'. When the young John Feltham, then Jules François, becomes J. F. Archibald, editor of the *Bulletin*, 'What he was turned into what he did'<sup>7</sup> and the subject's life-story 'disappears' into 'The Great Print Circus' he provided for writers and readers in a colonial culture. At this point, her subject becomes not so much a text as the sub-text to the writings of those he edited, a sub-text to be interpreted within the context of that colonial culture, with its paradoxical sense of both its distance from the metropolis and its need to create its own centre. When, in the account of his later life, Archibald reappears from under the text he orchestrated he becomes 'part of the recent history of madness' (pp.xi–xii), a footnote to the Foucaultian perception of insanity as a social construct.

Reminiscent of Sylvia Lawson's 'Great Print Circus' is Brian Matthews's use of music hall routine in *Louisa* (1987) to present the variegated voices and concerns expressed in the *Dawn*, Louisa Lawson's paper for women. Unlike Sylvia Lawson, Matthews's dramatised

7 Sylvia Lawson, *The Archibald Paradox* (Allen Lane, Ringwood, 1983), p.117.

biographer is apprehensive of his subject disappearing into the text Louisa edited and into the history of the same colonial society. Wistfully, this biographer dreams of being able to write a conventional biography, of being able to leave 'the networks of problematics' behind and to write 'rounded periods of biographical prose, flowing from and dictated by meticulous research'.<sup>8</sup> Does he, though, have enough material, not only to give the sense of 'a full life being lived' but to stop him from inventively filling the gaps and thus 'sliding from biography to phantom biography and from both into a disguised form of fiction'? (pp.5–6).

Matthews's biographer and 'Owen Webster'—the alter ego the biographer creates to allow an alternative voice—rehearse these 'problematics' in a series of exchanges over their work in progress. Central to their arguments is the relation of documentable record to story, of facts to fiction. The biographer in his desire to tell a story and develop a character, a character by whom he has become possessed, is in a schizoid relation to the facts. What stance should he assume: a pretence of objectivity and omniscience—or should he openly empathise and sympathise with his subject? Biographer and alter ego disagree heavily on this issue—while demonstrating what each approach entails—as they disagree on the relation of criticism to biography. For Owen Webster, the quality of Louisa Lawson's poetry 'would matter in a book of literary criticism or literary history' as the quality of her housekeeping would matter in a social history, but in a biography 'what is interesting is simply that the poetry and the housekeeping happened' (p.239). For the biographer also, Louisa's writings matter as part of her life but 'how can poetry matter other by being in itself the most intense and striking way possible ... Which means that it is important to determine as accurately as possible how accomplished Louisa's poetry is as poetry' (p.242).

The engaging play with such theoretical issues—contained within a metabiographical fiction that in turn contains fictional interludes: and which, even if there had never been a Louisa Lawson, could presumably still be read for affording some of the same fictional satisfactions as, say, A. S. Byatt's novel *Possession* (1990)—should not obscure Matthews's simultaneous observance of the biographical pact. Enfolded

<sup>8</sup> Brian Matthews, *Louisa* (McPhee Gribble, Melbourne, 1987), p.107. Subsequent page references, included in the text in parentheses, refer to this edition.

within *Louisa's* metabiographical and fictional coils is a Life that still satisfies conventional expectations, even though Matthews inverts conventional procedures by engaging openly with critical and scholarly problems that others more usually resolve within, or suppress beneath, their 'rounded periods of biographical prose'. Criticism and scholarship are also absorbed deeply into his Life-in-progress: the re-reading of Louisa's autobiography against her daughter Gertie's family memoirs and her son Henry's story 'The Drover's Wife' is an interpretative *tour de force* and an instance of what 'criticism', so often a problematical term today, can still mean—in this case, an imaginative, even inspired, insight into what is happening in such an incestuous interplay of texts.

The increasing number of Australian literary biographies and increasing interest in the form since 1980 could be interpreted as a desirable catching-up with the situation obtaining elsewhere with longer-established literatures—a catching-up akin to Australian literature's acquiring, for example, its own *Oxford History* (1981), *Companion* (1985) and *Literary Guide* (1987) during the same period. However, what might seem local and particular developments in Australian literary history can usually be correlated with those occurring elsewhere in the English-speaking world, and literary biography provides yet another example. Rather than being evidence of an often assumed cultural 'lag', the flourishing of interest here, both practical and theoretical, correlates with what has been occurring elsewhere over the same period—not only with biography itself but also with the wider reconstituting of the discourses that 'literary criticism' used to comprehend, and contain, more confidently than it does today.

The general tendency in recent literary discourse, a tendency exhibited in diverse ways within the *Penguin New Literary History*, has been to focus on areas, and genres, perceived to have been marginalised by established canons and historical overviews: women's writing, gay writing, black writing, migrant writing, regional writing. Already Australian literary biography offers a range of detailed 'case studies', and investigative models, which are broadly in keeping with, or readily assimilable to, the turn of literary-critical interest towards the social construction of gender, class and race, and consideration of how these constructions have impinged on writing at various stages. If,

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in the usual way of intellectual fashions, the turn in the United States from 'deconstruction' to 'new historicism' (a return to formerly repressed historical interests combining with a vogue for Geertzian 'thick description' of gender, class or race relations) is reflected here, the newly-discovered contemporaneity of Australian literary biography should see the millennium in.