

**Philip Butterss, ed. *Adelaide: A Literary City*.  
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The contribution of literature to the placed understanding of Australian culture has long been a fertile area of academic and artistic interest (e.g. Bennett 1991; Carter 2000; Gelder 2013; Goodwin & Goodwin 1986; Hadgraft 1960; Hodge & Mishra 1991; Knudsen 2004; Moore 1971). Establishing its independence from a more empirical British canon over time, Australian literature has sought to describe those unique landscapes, both urban and rural, which demarcate particular ways of being that we might term ‘Australian,’ even in all their plurality. Contributing to this body of literature, *Adelaide: A Literary City* begins with a grand gesture: ‘All cities are literary cities: places where people read, places where people write, places people write about’ (1), but it immediately draws the reader’s focus towards the local by continuing, ‘Perhaps though, not all cities can claim to have their very origins in the domain of the literary’ (1).

In this way, the text lays the foundations for the claim that Adelaide is perhaps *the* literary city within Australia, its very establishment based upon several key writings, including Edward Gibbon Wakefield’s (1829) *A Letter from Sydney*, which identified the centrality of literature to the building of a successful city. With this, the purpose of this book is made clear—to showcase the influence of Adelaide’s literary culture in both the national and local context; the latter in particular, where literature formed the foundations of settlement, due in part to the discursive establishment of Adelaide as a utopian, enlightened, and ‘untainted’ colony, free of convicts. The significance of this influence is then tracked across the chapters, identifying those periods when the literary culture of Adelaide was at its most vibrant, and simultaneously, most troubled by conservatism, explaining the ways in which literature can speak actively to political and social concerns. In this way, *Adelaide: A Literary City* contributes significantly to the historical accounts of Australia’s literary traditions and figures, as prior to this point, little had been written about ‘the texture of Adelaide life’ (8), or those who would attempt to be writers within it.

The book begins by recounting the establishment of Adelaide as a city, describing it as an imagined place, given physical, social, and economic existence through several descriptive texts. As Kerryn Goldsworthy (21) explains, ‘The city of Adelaide was brought into being by a succession of acts of writing . . . of projection.’ These acts of writing included Wakefield’s (1829) *A Letter from Sydney*, Captain Sturt’s *Two Expeditions into the Interior of Southern Australia*, *The South Australia Act of 1834* and the ship diaries of local travellers, each working to bring into existence the concept of a city, though none of these actually mention any sort of capital. In this way, Adelaide may be an exception, where the writing of place pre-exists the very place being written *about*; perhaps explaining why many of the writings are so utopian in nature, describing a city that *would be* perfect in its execution through detailed planning. Of course, as the author acknowledges, utopias are by their very nature, non-existent and the realities of pre-confederation Adelaide were quite different. It is Goldsworthy’s insights into these historical oppressions of utopian ideals that makes this chapter so engaging, helping the reader to understand perhaps why there is so little written about Adelaide specifically: ‘If the map is already perfect, then it doesn’t leave you anywhere new to go. And if the society is already perfect, then it doesn’t leave you anything new to say’

(35). This juxtaposition of the idealistic nature of literature and the problematic realities of the colonial context set the scene for the engaging chapters that follow.

Moving from an analysis of those documents which established Adelaide's existence to instead focus on an individual, Chapter 2 examines George Isaacs, a zealous author who attempted to fill what he termed 'a vacant place in our colonial literature' (3) within the challenging and often financially perilous space of the 19<sup>th</sup> century writer. As Anne Black rehearses Isaac's history of starting journals such as the *Number One*, editing newspapers such as the *Critic* and the *Bunyip*, the battle between the possibilities of great literature and the realities of economic hardships becomes evident, with authors required to take any jobs they could to support their passion for writing. The chapter creates a compelling narrative of struggle which presumably resonates still in the hearts of many contemporary writers whose passion for creation is not always practical. This theme is then further explored in Butters's empathetic discussion of C.J. Dennis's embattled attempt to be an author in Adelaide in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, as an author who attained financial success, it was instead Dennis's desire to utilise writing as a means to comment on society and create political rebellion that was embattled. Socialist in his leanings, Dennis lamented the apathy he saw around him, including his own, desiring to incite a passion for social justice, as seen in his publication, the *Gadfly*: 'What the trio wanted to produce was a weekly that pricked and stung, and in the process they intended to enjoy themselves' (84). As Butters points out, Dennis was a deeply flawed individual, erratic, moody, perhaps alcoholic, but his passion for the possibilities of literature as a social commentary gives this chapter an immediacy that reflects the contemporary experience, and makes it a particularly compelling read within this book.

This stability or otherwise of the writer's world is called into question in a different way through the third chapter, which examines the shifting capacity for literature to articulate identity, even that which is somewhat displaced, looking specifically at Scottish literature from the first 75 years of European settlement in Australia. According to Graham Tulloch, the contributions made by the Scottish population within South Australia were significant, with their writing used ubiquitously as toasts and tributes at many gatherings. Yet the formation of this identity through literature was not unproblematic, as the complex positioning of Scotland as simultaneously part of Britain and yet outside, created a dual identity that continued in Australia. Interestingly, the author suggests, this ambiguity also created possibilities; by sitting neither one place nor another, Scottish literature was able, in part, to exist almost everywhere, as a shared 'site of cultural memory' (59). It may have been this ability to transcend national boundaries that made the literature so attractive, as South Australia attempted to break ties from England and assert a 'new and separate identity of South Australia within the British Empire' (62). Such considerations of plurality within the historical development of South Australian identity resonate particularly with this reviewer, a Scottish-Canadian herself living in South Australia. More widely however, this chapter provides an important contribution, explaining some of those often unrecognised literary influences that gave rise to the capacity for such a unique and independent 'Australian' culture.

As each chapter moves the narrative of Adelaide's engagement with the literary forward in time, Chapter 5 outlines the work of three female writers who published autobiographical experiences of growing up in Adelaide in the 1920s and 30s, including Nancy Cato's *Marigold* (1992), Geraldine Halls' *This is My Friend's Chair* (1995), and Nene Gare's *A House with Verandahs* (1980) and *Kent Town* (1996). Examining questions of class,

aspiration, gender and impact of the world wars, Susan Sheridan identifies how these women were able to 'write the Adelaide of this period into existence' (95), the importance of their writing underscored by the inclusion of Gare in Joy Hooton's (1990) seminal study of Australian women's autobiographies called *Stories of Myself When Young*, from which Chapter 5 takes its title ('Stories of Herself When Young'). The portrayal of Adelaide as a 'child's city' (107) by all three authors, and thus one from which they inevitably move away, provides a literary base upon which to understand continuing social concerns about the sustainability of Adelaide's population, almost 100 years after their own experiences of the city. Moreover, the chapter's contributions to understandings of the gendered experience are important ones, building on the earlier work of authors like Hooton. Unfortunately, the overarching agenda of the chapter, to understand the women's perspective of Adelaide in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century on significant social issues of the era, seems not quite fully realised, which may, I suggest, be understood as simply a limitation of length given the mammoth task; it would be interesting to see what Sheridan might do with more space.

In addition to gender and class, the book also makes significant contributions to understandings of race and space, with Chapter 6 examining the sophisticated mechanisms of exchange between the rural and urban in the mid twentieth century, and Chapter 7 exploring the Jindyworobak movement and perhaps controversially, its 'cultural appropriation in order to canvass range and modalities' (128). In Chapter 6, Jill Roe sets out both her own rural and reading pedigree, rehearsing the perhaps surprising connections between Adelaide city and the rural spaces that surrounded it, suggesting that literary culture thrived within the countryside, perhaps more so than other spaces within Australia, because Adelaide did not follow the trend of historical fiction circulating elsewhere in Australia. Instead, through writing which produced one of Australia's first explorations of desert cultures, a greater awareness of the first peoples who resided there was created. This focus on writings related to the Indigenous populations is extended in Chapter 7's examination of the tensions and ambitions of the Jindyworobak movement. Though the movement itself is not explained in detail, this chapter provides a critical analysis of the motivations of this group of poets whose cutting edge focus on rural issues and Indigenous peoples has previously been much lauded but here, is brought into question. Specifically, Peter Kirkpatrick argues, often convincingly, that the Jindyworobaks were 'opportunistic rather than systematic students of Aboriginal culture' (129), with member poet Rex Ingamells 'less inclined to decry the loss of Indigenous culture than to sublimate it as a resource for Jindyworobak use, notably by zesting his poems with Aboriginal words' (130). Together, Chapters 5 through 7 highlight literature's important ability to comment on significant cultural shifts in relation to race, space, gender and class, by examining the works of local authors during the early to mid-twentieth century. Though more detail on these critical issues would always be welcome, each of the authors do an effective job of addressing the social complexities of the period, highlighting how the writing of place, by necessity, becomes the writing of race, gender and class.

To balance these issues, Alison Broinowski's chapter, which follows, provides a well-timed return to the paradisiacal, examining the claim that Adelaide might be understood as the 'Athens of the South.' During the 1960s Adelaide provided a home to many progressive thinkers, including individuals like Harry Medlin, Max Harris, and Geoffrey Dutton, whose work created the first writers week and arts festival in Australia. Their approach was challenged, however, by what the author terms 'big men' (148), those small-minded individuals whose predetermined ideas of taste and propriety often challenged opportunities for creative exploration, thus creating a divided city which was simultaneously progressive and conformist. The inclusion of the author's own perspective on Adelaide at the time is

particularly notable, grounding the attempts of the cultural community to pursue a longstanding utopian ideal, in the realities of the period, experienced firsthand. The scene painted for the reader is one of a point and counterpoint, in which inspirational works are celebrated, but only by certain groups, and thus the city cannot truly represent a utopia for all individuals. The author ends on a particularly poignant note, suggesting that the 'Athens of the South' should be mindful of its namesake's historic and contemporary struggles, particularly in light of how citizens of both cities exit and return, creating uncertainty that must be embraced if the cities are to survive.

Several of the final chapters of the book then return to focus on the literary figures of Adelaide from the latter half of the twentieth century to the present, including Max Harris, Geoffrey Dutton and Ken Bolton. Betty Snowden's overview of Harris's history as an avid reader and prolific but sensitive writer, for whom criticism could wound deeply, provides an understanding of a man who championed local and national literature in an unprecedented manner. Through determined efforts, Harris created multiple journals, introduced overseas literature to Adelaide, founded publication houses, and chaired influential television programs, all of which were devoted to understanding the place and content of Australian literature. Snowden's chapter provides a detailed account of Harris as an Adelaide luminary, without whom the literary landscape of both Adelaide and Australia would look very different. This reflects, I suggest, the larger agenda of the book to not only rehearse the history of literary development within Adelaide, but also highlight the critical contributions Adelaide has made to the national landscape, challenging conservative views through a multitude of literary platforms such as poetry, books, journals, weekly columns, and many more.

Following from the exceptional contributions of Harris, the next chapter focuses on Geoffrey Dutton, whose own work intersected often with Harris's, through Dutton's participation in Writers' Week, the Adelaide Festival of Arts and co-founding of *Australian Letters* and *Australian Book Review*. As Nicholas Jose suggests, 'Dutton was central to the city's post-war cultural initiatives' (183). Yet, despite his role as an exceptional editor and writer, many of Dutton's contributions have been overshadowed or forgotten; Jose seeks to reinvigorate an appreciation of Dutton's significant contributions once more. The analysis of what is perhaps Dutton's greatest work, 'New York Nowhere,' is a substantial addition to the literary criticism of his writing, particularly given the poem's scarcity in print, which this book seeks to remedy by including the full text. The importance of this inclusion is also substantial given that it provides opportunities for new readers, including myself, to engage with a poem which creates a rich sense of place, identity and the precariousness of the human experience, bringing Dutton back into the Australian landscape as a poet of significance.

Moving through the historical period of literary figures in Adelaide, Chapter 11 focuses on Ken Bolton in order to understand, the author argues, 'how a writer's sense of place may feature in the work, and more peripherally, the way a writer from elsewhere negotiates Adelaide' (240). Focusing primarily on Bolton's more recent work, Jill Jones highlights the references made to Adelaide and the ways in which Bolton's work clearly conveys that 'inbetweenness' that is so characteristic of Adelaide. 'It is a place where life is negotiable yet busy enough, urban if not quite urban enough for a super-abundance of ideas about art and poetry, but enough ideas anyway . . .' (242). It is clear from the writing that Jones is a fan of Bolton's work, praising its lack of poetic pretence; instead, each word is pressed into service in order to convey movement, timeliness, and the everyday. Bolton's poetry, Jones argues, is relational, an interesting descriptor given the sense of anonymity Bolton describes

experiencing in Adelaide. Though deriving great verve and imaginative input from the various festivals, organisations and publications that exist within Adelaide, the city remains a place where individuals work primarily as solitaires—a condition which Bolton experiences because of where he is situated, but also, the author hints, because he does not quite ‘fit’ with the writing establishment. Through this examination of Bolton and his work, Jones builds on the historic narrative of the previous chapters, conveying the contemporary experience of literature in Adelaide, which seems to be as contradictory as it has always been—though small in size, through publishing houses, festivals and writers centres, Adelaide presents a formidable volume of writing, but somehow always within certain confines, against which local authors consistently strain.

Of course, no literary overview of Adelaide would be complete without a reference, even in passing, to the more gruesome elements of Adelaide’s history, with the final chapter quickly rehearsing some of the most horrific literature to be written about Adelaide’s infamous murders. Yet this is quickly given respite, as Gillian Dooley turns her attention to two texts which focus on a safer version of Adelaide, given treatment in Amy T. Matthew’s *End of the Night Girl* and J.M. Coetzee’s *Slow Man*. Given the book’s discussion of other literary figures, it is apropos that Coetzee should feature in the final chapter, particularly given his association with both the University of Adelaide and the University of South Australia, marking him as an author of note within Adelaide academic and literary circles.

Matthew’s novel tells the story of Molly, a waiter who is haunted by the spectre of the Holocaust after seeing a picture of a victim and feels compelled to write the victim’s story, a challenge which is made more fraught, both for the main character and the author, by the fact that neither is Jewish. Despite the displacement of time and place associated with the Holocaust within the narrative, Molly’s position in Adelaide is evident, her social activities clearly placed in various suburbs of Adelaide. Yet the tensions she experiences as she is drawn to the story of the young Jewish girl and Molly’s own recognition that her pains pale in comparison may be understood as universal. Similarly, in Coetzee’s novel, Adelaide is characterised as a non-threatening, somewhat disconnected space, Dooley argues, with known locations thrown together in geographical ways that make little sense. Yet within the frame of the postmodern narrative to which Dooley believes Coetzee’s *oeuvre* belongs, this can make sense, as accurate and perhaps wholly recognisable representations of space are not required. Instead, the places written about are moulded into literary devices. Still, Adelaide remains recognisable in both novels as a space in which the characters are able to explore their own existences and difficulties, a theme which is referred to throughout the book in a multiplicity of place-specific ways.

*Adelaide: A Literary City* provides a valuable overview of Adelaide’s literary history that is at once both remote and all too present—the struggles to establish a sense of place and a literary community, the attempts to subvert what was understood as the conservative provincialism of the establishment and the difficulties of grappling with a city that has always been narrated as a utopian ideal even within the confines of sometimes difficult economic and something realities. Woven throughout the book as a thematic acknowledgement of the complex social and political development of a body of literature, these themes remain relevant today, challenging Adelaide’s writing community to remain vigilant, working against that which might create a staid understanding of the city, by bringing it to life through description, observation and satirical comment. As Kerry Goldsworthy suggests:

Why in the twenty-first century is there still so little writing about the lanes and gutters and cafes and factories of Adelaide, about the body of the city? About its heart, its gut, its muscles and its little capillaries; about its circulation, its digestion, its breath; about its beauties and its bruises?

Given the level of interest in Adelaide literature that this book successfully creates, one does wonder—why indeed?

*Jodie George, University of South Australia*

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