Contemporary Australian Literature

by Nicholas Birns

Sydney Studies in Australian Literature
Contemporary Australian Literature
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Contemporary Australian Literature

A World Not Yet Dead

Nicholas Birns
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Essays of mine adjacent to this book though not part of it shed light on some figures undertreated here. David Malouf is given a full overview in my essay for the 2014 special issue of the Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (JASAL) on his work, while there is more on Tim Winton in my essay in Tim Winton: Critical Essays, edited by Lyn McCredden and Nathanael O’Reily (University of Western Australia Press, 2014). Christos Tsiolkas’ The Slap and Elliot Perlman’s Three Dollars, as well as their predecessors in D. H. Lawrence’s Kangaroo, are examined in my 2009 JASAL article “Something to Keep You Steady”. Patrick White’s relationship to late modernity is examined in “The Solid Mandala and Patrick White’s Late Modernity” in Transnational Literature, November 2011. Other work of mine on Gerald Murnane’s recent fiction is to be found in my reviews of A History of Books in Antipodes and Southerly, both published in 2013. More on Stead’s For Love Alone is to be found in my article in the first issue of the Chinese Journal of Australian Cultural Studies, edited by Wang Guanglin of Songjiang University in Shanghai. Shirley Hazzard’s United Nations short stories, mentioned with respect to Frank Moorhouse in Chapter 7, are examined in my essay in Shirley Hazzard: New Critical Essays,

Robert Dixon, as editor of this series, provided detailed and much-needed assistance, drawing on his vast knowledge of Australian literary studies. Robert is not only one of the great contemporary scholar–teachers of Australian literature; he also has a deep concern for the field worldwide. Despite the internet, to work in Australian literary studies outside Australia is still to be at a decided logistical and informational disadvantage, and Robert’s diligent and attentive assistance to me helped to remedy this gap. I really appreciate the dedication and professionalism of Sydney University Press, including Susan Murray’s expert direction of the project, Agata Mrva-Montoya’s timely and enthusiastic interventions, and Denise O’Dea’s thorough and perceptive copy-editing.

My larger debts to the community of Australian literary scholarship and its pioneering American exponents are recorded in the first chapter. The death of Herbert C. Jaffa, news of which I received while beginning work on Chapter 1, marked the loss of an American who faithfully and selflessly loved Australia and its literature.

In Canberra, I lived near Anzac Parade, and thought continually of the Australian veterans of both world wars, who helped to ensure that we face no more dire problems than those of late modernity and neoliberalism.

This book was partly written on territory historically associated with the Ngunnawal people. I acknowledge them and their custodianship and unceded sovereignty of the land.
The authors analysed in this book are of different generations, regions, heritages and philosophies. Yet they share a willingness to name the issues of the contemporary, to confront them, but to do so with nuance and poise, to be indirectly and sinuously passionate.

The authors who appear in this book, in both brief and extended roles, were chosen out of a mixture of timeliness, convenience, and my personal familiarity with and affinity for them. I am not proposing them as a set canon of contemporary Australian literature or as a unity for anything but the provisional purposes of this book. But I do believe that these writers, in their different ways, all testify to the persistence of imaginative hope in the aftermath of a free-market ideology that seeks to degrade humanity into automatons of profit and loss, success and failure.

Both poets and novelists have been included because I wish to demolish the old canard that, whereas fiction pertains to society and can be a reading of the culture, poetry speaks to inward states of experience. Both genres can do this, but they can also assume other roles, and the novelists presented in this book – above all the nonpareil Gerald Murnane – speak to private experience, while the poets – above all Ouyang Yu and John Kinsella – are as publicly engaged as any contemporary writer. In the twenty-first century, the aesthetic and the public have to mix; they cannot be cordoned off from each other.

This book is largely concerned with the economic philosophy of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism proposes a utopian confidence in the free market and a valuation of human life only as it is or is not successful in market terms. I do not wish to make the argument that literature, as such, can or should be a privileged mode of resistance to neoliberalism and the inequality that comes in its wake. The novel is, nevertheless, a form that contributes to a reading of the culture, and as such uses its particular modes of empathic identification to register with great sensitivity the really existing contemporary situation of its characters. In this book, we will see the persistence of Christos Tsiolkas’ Danny Kelly through castigation as a loser; the loutish valour of Tim Winton’s Tom Keely in belatedly refurbishing his family’s role of social honour; the way Alexis Wright’s Oblivia cares for others while being vulnerable herself; the healing after complex trauma that Gail Jones permits her troubled characters. All these writers testify to how we can conceive life differently than merely valuing one another by our financial conditions.

This is not to say neoliberalism does not have some positive aspects: cultural diversity, a greater variety of lifestyle, entertainment and aesthetic choice, and wider networks of
communication are among them, as well as, necessarily, the greater viability of democratic institutions in the post–Cold War world. Stephen Greenblatt wisely urges us to avoid a “sentimental pessimism” that “collapses everything into a global vision of domination and subjection”. But, like all periods of history, the current one involves forms of injustice and dogma that writers must defy, evade or circumvent. The assumption behind this book is that writers always have to struggle against their cultural context, or, in Greenblatt’s words, to “make imaginative adaptations’’ in their work, no matter their manifest cultural position or the apparent benignity of the ruling forces. This era’s writers have a unique challenge, and this book tells the story of how, in Australia, they have responded to this challenge.

I am not saying that these are the only contemporary Australian writers who can provide this testimony, nor that those Australian writers who cannot be read in this way are either not worth reading or not of aesthetic value. This book offers one map of what is going on today; other critics would draw other maps. Furthermore, Australian literature is different from that of the UK and USA in that it has never had a set canon. As important as figures such as Henry Lawson, Judith Wright, Patrick White and Peter Carey have been, the reader who does not wish to engage with these writers has always been able to navigate around them. In turn, no one person can read all of Australian literature or be conversant with its full range: it is too large and too diverse for that. Australian poetry has had more of a set canon than Australian fiction – certainly in the mid-twentieth century no anthology of Australian poetry could exclude Kenneth Slessor, David Campbell or R. D. Fitzgerald – but today of those three only Slessor still plays a central role in the national literary conversation. The fortunes of Adam Lindsay Gordon – the Australian poet in the nineteenth century, but ranked below his contemporaries Charles Harpur and Henry Kendall by the late twentieth century – testify to the openness of the Australian canon, an openness that has only increased as Indigenous, migrant and expatriate writers, as well as those working in languages other than English, have more recently stretched the very definition of what it is to be Australian. Meanwhile, the contemporary availability of digital and print-on-demand technologies has expanded the mathematical possibility of what can be canonical and, along with a more tolerant cultural agenda, has meant we have more books to choose from than ever before.

Australian literature, because of its traditional pluralisms, is well equipped to handle this new contingency. I attribute part of this to the fact that Australia has had no single dominant metropolitan area. Whereas London and New York have defined British and American literature far more than any other city in those countries, Sydney and Melbourne have kept up with each other, while Perth and Brisbane have held their own in a smaller compass. Canberra plays a key role in this book, not just as site of much of its composition (while I was a visiting fellow at the Canberra campus of the University of New South Wales), but as a potential ground of re-emergent Australian idealism – reflecting the fact that there is no single metropolitan space for the artificially built national capital to rival. The plurality of Australian literature is its great joy, and one of the qualities that enable it to be resilient against the threats to the imagination with which this book is so concerned.

2 Greenblatt, Marvelous Possessions, 152.