



AUSTRALIAN LITERARY CONSCIOUSNESS

Dr. Janaiah Saggurthi

Guest faculty, Dept. of English, Acharya Nagarjuna University, Guntur, A.P.

One of the Perennial problems for all the societies is defining 'Self' in relation to the knowledge of 'Self'. For countries like India and Australia, with their different kinds of Colonial Experience, the locus of art and history seems to be confined to the last 200 years. To be centered on the divided nature of experience and on the establishment of an identity it draws from its colonial past, moves on to something better for it is plain that the nature of the problem in each country is not strictly comparable. It merely points out that for Australian writings there has been a sort of inevitability about the pursuit of self-knowledge through an exploration of antecedents.

Paul Keating the former prime-minister of Australia urged upon his countrymen to redefine Australian national identity by claiming that culture and identity for indigenous people have become essential element of Australian identity. For the last three decades Australia has been increasingly caught up in an irresistible transformation of its traditional political and Economic stance in the Asia/Pacific region. It is instructive to address ourselves to the question of how this transformation has been represented in contemporary Australian literature

7

'Literature' has been a contentious term, which has broadened and multiplied its usages in the context of Australia. The critical and theoretical lenses have changed. A shift can be observed from a *belles-letters* tradition in which written works were valued chiefly for their beauty of language, and their emotional effects or uplifting moral sentiments, through New Critical engagement with autonomous linguistic structures, to more recent conventions which value literature mainly for a wider set of discourses. In this process, aesthetic concerns ('beauty,' 'taste,' etc.) have given way to issues, themes or ideology. The firm distinctions between 'high' and 'low' cultures and their corresponding literatures have been interrogated and the constructedness of canons has been exposed. From talkback radio to school lessons and even University research, literature in the 1980s and 1990s has been treated often as a source of themes and issues, which bear on matters of urgent contemporary

relevance.

How Australian literature is different from the traditional English literature? Is it not a part of the great English tradition? Australian literature, like all great literature, is dynamic. It is perceived as the response of creative writers to the condition of life in Australia. A truly great writer would be one who successfully comes to grips with authentic feeling with the Australian environment, its character and its cultural syndromes. Literature is the whole expression of a literate community's life and activity, and this expression finds its outlet through language.

8

There are a number of major turning points or crises, in the general history of Australia, which have impacted on literature as on other aspects of the personal and social lives of Australians. These moments of trauma and change include the settlement or invasion of the country marked by the landing of Governor Philip at Sydney Cove in 1788; the beginning of the gold rushes in 1851; the beginning of the First World War in 1914; the Second World War in 1939; and Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War from 1965. What these moments have in common is that they are all international events with enormous consequences on the views of Australian's themselves and they provide convenient apertures through which others may view Australian culture.

How 'Australian' is the literature of Australia? The Sydney University Magazine in 1852 called for a 'National Literature' which should comprise work of beauty and of the imagination, clearly stamped with a unique identity, free from service imitation, self-dependant and written by poets whose intellect and sensibility were shaped by the Australian environment and culture. The early canon-makers of Australian literature knew what they wanted. They wanted a literature, which was national but not narrowly nationalistic. Daniel Deniehy had this in mind when he wrote that Harpur's The Bushrangers – A Play, and Other Poems (1853) contained the most satisfactory proof of the existence of native genius of a high order.

9

Frederick Sinnett's 'The Fiction Fields of Australia', published over two issues of the Melbourne Journal of Australasia in 1856, deserves the importance accorded it by scholars like C.H. Hadgraft, who edited the essay as a monograph in 1966. Acknowledging Australia's lack of archaeological accessories, apart from Aboriginal

associations, Sinnett asserts that Australia nevertheless possesses all the attributes of human society and an abundance of scenery to provide material for the creative genius (Frederick Sinnett, The Fiction Fields of Australia, 1856, ed. By Cecil Hadgraft, St. Lucia: Queensland University press, 1966).

In tracing the chronological evolution of Australian literature Sinnett foresees writers like Henry Lawson, Barbara Baynton, Rosa Praed and Joseph Furphy would convince readers that the conversations of squatters, bullock-drivers and diggers could make literary material. In arguing at length that the right conditions exist for the development of Australian literary genius. The brief but influential The Beginnings of an Australian Literature (1898) was delivered in London as a lecture by Arthur Patchett Martin, who had lived in Australia for thirty years, and edited the Melbourne Review and several anthologies which included Australian verse and prose. Martin described himself as 'the publicist' who first introduced George Gordon McCrae (1833-1927), a famous Australian poet, to English readers. Martin's account begins by doubting that any literature written in English should be designated by its colonial origin, but concedes that

10

there is convenience in using the terms: American or Australian literature. He assures his English audience that the younger generation of Australia had achieved nothing in literature since the death of the 'two remarkable young Englishmen,' Marcus Clarke and Adam Lindsay Gordon. Martin finds nothing distinctively Australian, apart from a few selections from Henry Kendall and the best of A.B. Paterson's racy ballads, but in these strangely assorted volumes and scattered selections' he faintly discerns 'The Beginnings of an Australian Literature.'

Anthologies were important in the process by which authors became available to the public and academics. The American lecturer Bruce Sutherland, teaching Australian literature at Pennsylvania State College, convinced that Australian literature was beginning to count in the contemporary cultural transition. The reading public for poets, including many now forgotten, was

widened in the later 19th century by the availability of anthologies like William Yarrington's Prince Alfred's Wreath: A collection of Australian Poems by various authors (1868), Sydney Punch Staff Papers (1872), Christmas annuals in 1875, 1877 and 1881, Patchett Martin's An Easter Omelette in Prose and Verse (1879) and Our Exhibition Annual (1878). These collections, and the post-federation anthologies, indicate a ground swell of public

acceptance of Australian writing without which the emergence of any kind of canon is an esoteric phenomenon with little cultural significance. This publishing activity expanded

11

immediately after Federation, with Bertram Steven's seven separate anthologies running into twenty-one new editions or re printings between 1906 and 1932. Bertram Stevens The Golden Treasury of Australian Verse (1909, 1912 and 1913) is typical of these anthologies that concentrated on shorter and lyrical poems. His informative introduction, conservative and untouched by nationalism offers sound appraisal of writers, journals and literary movements. Short fiction reprinted in the Bulletin's A Golden Shanty: Australian Stores and Sketches: Prose and Verses by Bulletin Writers (1890) and The Bulletin Story Book (1901) enlarged the readership and reputation of prose writers like Henry Lawson, Louis Becke, Ernest Favenc, Louise Mack, Barbara Baynton and Steele Rudd.

Public awareness of literature made it easier for Prime Minister Alfred Deakin to establish the Commonwealth Literary Fund in 1908. Inspired by the British Royal Literary Fund, the CLF represented financial assistance and an assurance of the cultural value of the writer's vocation that most nineteenth century poets received only from a limited circle of supporters.

Obviously the nation as object and affiliation was being produced before the 1890s fiction, as elsewhere. Even in early 'guidebook' novels like Thomas McCombie's Arabin (1845), Alexander Harris's The Emigrant Family (1849) or Henry Kingsley's The Recollections of Geoffry Hamlyn (1859) there are attempts to locate national 'types' and invest national identification in the natural

12

environment. Novels, like other national texts, invoke nations of readers to the extent that they assume or address common national values and a set of national readers. Thus a significant occurrence across the latter third of the 19th century in Australia is the increasing local publication of Australian writing, and the serialization of local fiction in national and regional papers and magazines.

The Jindyworobak movement is perceived as an extreme instance of the impulse to form alliances to foster a national literature. The movement has inspired to derive Australianness from the aboriginal culture. The Fellowship of Australian Writers (FAW) was formally inaugurated at Sydney's Lyceum Club on 23 November 1928. The first President was John le Gay Brereton, Professor of English at Sydney University. This aspect makes us

to understand the challenges that Australian Universities were, until very recently, consistently indifferent, even hostile, to Australian literature. One of the most significant FAW activities was the revivifying and refocusing of the Commonwealth Literary Fund (CLF). Established by the Deakin government in 1908, the CLF's provided pensions and grants-in-aid to impoverished writers and their dependants. A campaign during the 1930s resulted in the greatly extended charter of functions. The role of the FAW in the evolution of Australian literature was recognised by representation of the CLF and this served as beacon for over a decade.

13

This is a reminder of the system of informal networks, which, in addition to formal structures such as the FAW, were of great importance in building a sense of literary community. The most celebrated of such net workers were undoubtedly Vance and Nettie Palmer, who cultivated the role after their return to Melbourne from England in 1915. Their contribution is seen as a major part of their commitment to the development of Australian literature. Recent work by Drusilla Modjeska and Carole Ferrier has highlighted the role of Nettie (1885-1964) as a central point of communication for a whole group of women writers, supplementing the attention already drawn to her role as an early local promoter of the work of Henry Handel Richardson. At the time, however, it was Vance (1885-1959) who was seen as the embodiment of 'the man of letters'. His public profile placed him at the centre of literary activity through his novels, literary journalism, and the use of the medium of radio through the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC). As recognition, the initial Victorian Premier's Literary Awards (1985) were bestowed for fiction on Vance and for non-fiction on Nettie.

There was considerable consensus among writers and readers of the 1920s and 1930s that Australian literature was to be valued for its capacity to represent Australian reality. With different notions of writing, the real Australia often proved to have less to do with modes of representation than with granting certain aspects of Australian life. Notions of the Bush as Australia's true reality had

14

gained a flying start in the experience of the first settlers. Given the strangeness of its actual and imminent presence, to become 'at home' in the early stages of settlement, an essential step towards entering Australian population of the 1920s and 1930s literal bush-living was considered a minority experience. In terms of demography, the bush was retreating further

and further in to the outback. The spate of childhood reminiscences of bush life seemed to suggest not only that the individual reminiscence both in time and space but life. Nonetheless, the project of privileging the bush as Australia's definitive reality was not yet too relegated to mere nostalgia. There remained an audience with an appetite for accessing, a life that still perceived as actively present at the heart of Australian experience.

The outback of Australian literature of 1930s and 1940s is a 'White man's' domain. And yet one disconcerting consequence of the retreat of the bush was that the figure of the Aborigine re-emerged as a presence. The Aborigine is sorrowfully cast as member of the lost tribes. It could be argued that such restored visibility was a pre-condition for White Australians to come to terms with the history of their relationship with the country's indigenous population but also of the demands of Aborigines to be audible as well as visible within Australian literary culture. Subsumed under the concept of the Primitive, they could be protected with kindly condescension (*The Little Black Princes*, 1905) or firmly suppressed if the 'savagery' of the primitive should erupt into violence. The latter position was unquestioned in Ion L. Idriess's *Man Tracks* (1937).

A degree of grudging admiration was accorded to a display of manliness which challenged the more common representation within this period of an Aboriginal passivity simultaneously valued and despised.

Writer's relationships with one another during and after the war were channelled through a variety of formations, from loose 'acquaintance networks' through 'literary societies' of the older, nineteenth-century sort, to more formally constituted bodies such as the FAW and, later, the Australian Society of Authors (ASA) in 1962. The latter in particular have been active in arguing the value of literature in general or of Australian literature in particular, and in promoting the professional interests of writers themselves. All three have functioned, at different moments, as ways of clearing a space for literature. Of more importance, than the activities of Writer's organisations in shaping the institution of Australian literature since the war has been the role of the government, in both its benign and its more hostile guises. Since the establishment of CLF as a modest pension scheme for retired and disabled writers in 1908, the federal government has been directly involved in the patronage of literature in Australia. In 1939, as a result of agitation by the FAW and the active support of ex-Labour Prime Minister James Scullin, the CLF was greatly expanded both financially, by a threefold increase in finding, and in the range of its activities which now extended to promoting and assisting the production of literature in Australia. As Lawson

puts it, Australian literature became, for the first time, a 'subsidised industry.'

16

The most comprehensive strategy for regulating the freedom, and hence curtailing the disruptive power, of reading in the post war period was the establishment of 'Australian Literature' as an object of university study teaching. Those responsible for planning the first degree-level course in Australian literature, offered at Canberra University College in 1955, Tom Ingles Moore and A.D. Hope, were undoubtedly driven by nothing less exemplary than the CLF's mission: 'to encourage students to study the literature of their own country.'

A.D. Hope's literary influence throughout the 1950s was immense, not just because of his published criticism and numerous literary reviews for the Sydney Morning Herald, but because of his radio work as the main book reviewer for the ABC, succeeding Vane and Nettie Palmer. His importance reflects the unique cultural function he performed. He was a crucial agent in taming and training the general reader of Australian literature into university-approved ways of reading and evaluating Australian books. One side of Hope's task, and that of the universities, was to disseminate a certain way of reading Australian literature. The other side of it was to establish an agreed content, that is, to establish a canon. Hope was very explicit about this part of the brief in several places, but it was the younger Vincent Buckley whose 1959 essay 'Towards an Australian Literature' put the case for a canon most clearly.

The celebrated history of Australian literature which began with Aboriginal storytelling, an integral part of life for Indigenous Australians, continued with the

17

oral stories brought by convicts in the late eighteenth century. As the new colony developed, so did the culture of recording stories inspired by the new experiences and different landscapes of this continent, so that by the start of the twentieth century the tradition of uniquely Australian storytelling was well established. Image courtesy of the National Library of Australia. While many of those early works are now forgotten, some have remained part of the Australian ethos.

Marcus Clarke's For the term of his natural life, for example, is still being published today, more than 100 years after it was written. Similarly, the bush ballads of Henry Lawson and Andrew 'Banjo' Paterson have become so ingrained in Australian history, that most Australians are word-perfect when singing Waltzing Matilda.

Published in 1901, My Brilliant Career by Miles Franklin is often said to be the first

authentic Australian novel. However, it was Ethel Florence Lindesay Richardson - writing under the pseudonym of Henry Handel Richardson - who is often regarded as the most important Australian writer of the early twentieth century. Other twentieth-century novelists noted for having a particularly Australian flavour to their books include: Lorrie Graham, *Peter Carey*, between 1981-1983. Image courtesy of the National Library of Australia.

The arrival of Patrick White is of great significance to Australian literary scenario. His writings presented a challenge to many of the critics and substantiated the very evolution of Australian literature in the right direction. The

18

Bestowing of Noble prize in literature on Patrick White has drawn the attention of the whole world towards his writings. White's life marked the beginning of new epoch. During his lifetime White was appreciated and hated. No criticism could project White's writings in an objective and impassioned manner. David Marr in his stupendous biographical work Patrick White- A life has quenched the phenomenal critical inquiries. The practical outcome of these impulses was not of course a clearly defined and defended group of Australian works and authors that commanded anything like universal acceptance as the core and essence of Australian Literature. The outcome, in two words, was 'Patrick White,' who became the chosen site of attributed literary greatness in the 1950s and 1960s.

In 1973 while there have been only a few imitators of white's idiosyncratic style many younger writers, both men and women, have acclaimed him for his willingness to mix genres and break the rules of conventional writing. . To Australian writers of the next generation white led the way in announcing the pre occupation of the serious contemporary novelist with experiment. The novelists who have dominated Australian fiction since the 1960's The Astley, Petercarey, David Foster, Helen Garner, David Ireland, Elizabeth Jolley, Thomas Keneally, and David Malouf-all display women debt to the fiction of Patrick White. By 1965 White had completed the first stage of his career, demonstrating how the traditional subjects of Australian fiction and legend- the Settlers and the explorer

19

could be rewritten as the focus of contemporary questions about the relationship of the individual to god and Society.