

Tongues of fire

Refreshing perspectives on cultural formation

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THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE

edited by Peter Pierce

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A suitable motto for any prospective compiler of a large-scale history of a national literature might be 'No Place for a Nervous Editor' (to adapt the title of Lucy Frost's study of nineteenth-century women's journals). A few of the portentous questions for this imagined figure include: how is 'literature' to be conceptualised at the beginning of the twenty-first century (witness the Balkan culture war that followed the publication of the estimably inclusive *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature*, 2009); how to balance the different needs and competencies of readers – students at tertiary and secondary level, academic specialists from various disciplines, a diverse non-Australian audience; how to choose contributors who combine scholarly authority with an ability to write jargon-free language for a diverse readership; how to construct a book that will satisfy both the searcher for information about a particular book or topic and the (probably rare) reader who wants to proceed from cover to cover?

Peter Pierce is to be congratulated on finding satisfactory answers to all of these questions. The *Cambridge History* is indeed a new kind of history of Australian literature, concerned as much with discussing specific books and periods as with placing its various subjects within appropriate cultural, political and theoretical contexts. Pierce quotes Harry Heseltine's witticism about Laurie Hergenhan's *Penguin New Literary History of Australia* (1988) – 'it was hard to see the trees for the wood'. His own volume is a commendable balancing act between the conceptual and the specific; the author-

study and the cultural taxonomy.

The *History* has a thoughtful quadripartite structure, which invites the reader to move backwards and forwards between contributions. The first two sections (comprising half of the twenty-four chapters) are concerned with colonial literature and ideas of literature, and with developments from Federation to 1950. The fourth section explores writing and cultural history from 1950 to 'nearly now'. A reader of, say, Dennis Haskell's thought-provoking essay on post-1950 Australian poetry might well be drawn back to Peter Kirkpatrick's examination of poetry and popular culture from 1890 to 1950, and from there to Vivian Smith's well-informed but rather more conventional essay on colonial poetry, in the first section. This is a journey that might well be taken in the other direction, of course.

The third section, titled 'Traverses', does, in a more sustained way, what many of the individual chapters in the 'chronological' divisions of the *History* do. These four essays, on children's literature, representations of Asia, autobiography, and the knotted relationships between history and fiction, are strongly thematic and range across the genres of fiction, poetry and life writing. Philip Mead's coda, 'Nation, Literature, Location', returns to this mode, in a focused and wide-ranging revisioning of the paradigm of literature's role in nation building, the dominant discourse in writing and literary history for a century and a half after European occupation. His examination of a new regionalism is one of the *History's* most important contributions to our understanding of the actualities and potentialities of

that protean entity called 'Australian literature'.

Another structural layer is provided by three essays on the subject of Australian writing's complex affiliations with British (and particularly English) culture. The *History* opens with Ken Stewart's 'Britain's Australia', which makes important qualifications to the myth of the new country's cultural enslavement to British metropolitan and Romantic ways of writing. Stewart's subsections on Shakespeare, Dickens, Gilbert and Sullivan, and Wilde offer insights into what these very different signatures of Britishness meant in the colonies.

This chapter is neatly balanced by Peter Morton's 'Australia's England, 1880–1950', which draws attention to how little creative stimulus the long-awaited experience of living in England gave even to great writers such as Lawson and Richardson; he makes the perceptive contrast between the Australians' familiarity with English culture and mores and the sense of strangeness and foreignness out of which expatriate Americans, notably Henry James, wrote so memorably. Between these is Pierce's own 'Australia's Australia', another inclusive essay grounded firmly in its author's acute understanding of a series of significant cultural and political shifts in the aftermath of the Great War. The 'texts' with which this piece engages include paintings, polemical works and the highly influential writings of C.E.W. Bean.

Other contributors also offer refreshing perspectives that take into account changing cultural and social formations; Peter Kirkpatrick, for example, offers a salutary reminder of the continuing influence of the Victorian custom of recitation on the development of popular poetry, and emphasises the nexus between the development of radio and other electronic sound media and the decline both of space in newspapers for verse and the place of poetry in everyday life. His argument resonates with that of Susan Lever in a later chapter on Australian fiction; tellingly, she draws attention to the ways in which television drama and documentary have stealthily but firmly

eroded the domains of the novel and the stage play.

Indigenous Australian writing is not corralled into a special chapter; to have done so might have been to simplify a set of complex relationships between traditional telling and speaking practices and acquired English alphabetic forms of discourse. The exception is Penny Van Toorn's brilliant essay on early indigenous writings, where she draws attention to the longevity of pictorial and other forms of signification, and quotes movingly from the writings of indigenous 'co-authors' such as Bennelong and Biraban, who worked with the missionary Launcelot Threlkeld in translating the Bible into the Awabakal language. Indigeneity is a core theme of John Kinsella's highly polemical study of modern poetry. His contention is that the dispossession of the Aboriginal population is the source of a profound anxiety at the heart of Australian poetry; together with his views about competing modernisms, this continues to invite critical debate. Kinsella's healthy resistance to political correctness is evidenced in his defence of the Afrikaans–Australian poet John Meeus's 'appropriations' of Nyoongar.

Systematic analyses of material culture and infrastructure are welcome inclusions to this thoroughly contemporary reference guide. David Carter's 'Publishing, Patronage and Cultural Politics', for example, is essential reading for anyone who wants to know more about the complicated history of journal publication, the influence upon literary studies of a rapidly changing university system, and the effects of successive governments on cultural life (he is particularly good on Cold War politics, and his essay should be read in conjunction with the account of Vincent Buckley's engagements in John McLaren's 2009 biography). Tanya Dalziel's chapter on colonial book ownership and dissemination, and Robert Dixon's work on some key players in Australia's connections with publishers and literary associations abroad (Katharine Susannah Prichard, Vance and Nettie Palmer) should also be mentioned here. Dixon argues persuasively for his thesis that 'cultural nationalism in Aus-

tralia had international roots'. Richard Nile and Jason Ensor provide, inter alia, intriguing accounts of the history of the Miles Franklin Award and of the reprinting history of Australian novels here and abroad (should we be surprised that the crime novelist Carter Brown scores 313 'manifestations' on the local league table for reprints? Patrick White gets 208, while Elizabeth Jolley is sidelined at forty-nine).

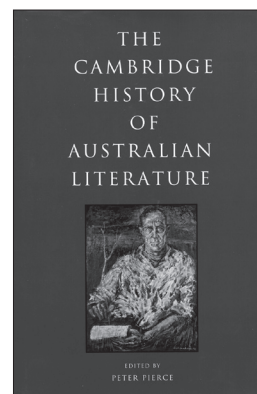
When considering a work of this magnitude, there are bound to be demurrals and disagreements over the extent of representation of particular authors and genres, and disappointments over omissions. Henry Lawson is the most frequently discussed single author in the *History*; this is partly the product of the structural emphasis on the Australian short story. No novelists writing in the last eighty years or so – not even Patrick White, David Malouf or Peter Carey – receive such sustained attention, which some readers may find surprising.

More troubling is the omission of successful writers of the present: to name but three, Gillian Mears, Miles Franklin winner Steve Carroll and Carrie Tiffany, whose Orange Prize short-listing for *Everyman's Rules for Scientific Living* (2005) brought an international readership. (That meretricious pair, Helen Darville and Norma Khouri, do rate mentions, on the other hand, on the basis of their notoriety.) Lever apologises for the slippages through her 'overview' net, and one feels a measure of sympathy for her endeavour to subordinate such a plethora of authors and sub-genres to a developing argument. Although their discussions of poetry since 1950 make extremely valuable contributions to critical discourse, it is regrettable that Dennis Haskell and John Kinsella have had nothing to say about some notable contemporary poetic voices – what of Judith Beveridge and Stephen Edgar, or, for that matter, Clive James?

It is heartening to see that separate chapters are devoted to autobiography and representations of Asia. Robin Gerster's lively essay begins with an account of Lawson's 'The Tracks That Lie

By India', where he writes, 'It is almost as if Clancy had not gone to Queensland droving at all, but grown his hair, hopped onto a Qantas Boeing, taken to dope and started hanging out in an ashram.' It is a pity that room could not have been found for a complete chapter on migrant writing (mentioned, of course, incidentally) and that more attention could not have been given to burgeoning genres such as the essay and detective fiction in Australia.

Cambridge University Press is to be congratulated on a superbly produced book, including a comprehensive bibliography, which directs new readers to invaluable online resources. (I observed only one misprint – 'Edmonstone' in the relevant chapter, correctly spelt in the index.) The cover is artfully iconic: an outback-red background frames the 1962 Archibald-winning portrait of Patrick White by the Viennese-born painter Louis Kahan. The metropolitan, the primitive and the prophetic come into symbolic union here, as the tongues of fire from the landscape are repeated on the shirt of the writer, who sits, pen in hand, challenging the reader with his gaze. Iconic, but ironic, too, when we recall the *Australian's* successful hoax of 2006 (when several publishers' readers failed to recognise a chapter from one of White's best-known novels), and when White's novels are frequently out of print. ■



Gregory Kratzmann edited *A Steady Storm of Correspondence: Selected Letters of Gwen Harwood, 1943–1995* (2001) and co-edited (with Chris Wallace-Crabbe) an edition of her Selected Poems, *Mappings of the Plane* (2009).