Australian literary expatriatism is a cultural phenomenon that is widely accepted and often alluded to. The idea that Australian writers have laboured with or against a common desire to travel back to the site of British Australia’s cultural beginnings resonates with many, especially those who are able to bring to mind their own overseas pilgrimages. The more negative aspect of this is the idea that the Australian literary scene and infrastructure were too poorly developed to foster literary imaginations and thus practitioners were forced to leave in search of sustenance in the cultural metropolises of the old world (such as London and Paris). This feature of expatriatism is often bemoaned but seldom questioned, at least in reference to the first 160 years of European settlement. Indeed, a significant number of literary people did make the journey to try their luck at the centre of the publishing world, and thus there are plenty of subjects for Bruce Bennett and Anne Pender’s study: From a Distant Shore, Australian Writers in Britain, 1820-2012.

Interrogating the phenomenon of literary expatriatism is difficult because of the uneven and at times contradictory nature of the content already available. There is a lack of consensus in the field about the peak timing of the exodus. The result is inconsistent coverage of the alleged trend throughout Australia’s European history. Steven Alomes’ When London Calls focuses on the decades following the Second World War in response to what he sees as a ‘rising wave of postwar movement to Britain’.¹ For Peter Morton, author of Lusting for London: Australian Expatriate Writers at the Hub of Empire, 1870-1950 the ‘haemorrhage of [Australia’s] literary brainpower’ took place in the 1890s and the early decades of the twentieth century.² Others have located the trend in the years following the Great War, or even have it persisting until the twenty-first century. Bennett and Pender’s depiction decidedly avoids this issue with sheer breadth of coverage: nearly two hundred years from 1820 to 2012. Beginning with the earliest literary expatriate on record (W. C. Wentworth who made the trip to England in 1817), the study includes writers overseas up until the present day.

The next stumbling-block for the aspiring chronicler of Australian literary expatriatism is the problem of inclusion. Who qualifies as Australian? What is an expatriate? Which kinds of writers should be included? For Bennett and Pender an Australian expatriate is ‘someone who was born in Australia and who spent substantial or formative periods of their writing careers in Britain’ (8). They extend this formula so it includes three writers who were brought to Australia as small children: Martin Boyd, Patrick White and M. J. Hyland. Of the qualifying people who also had a piece of creative writing published in the appropriate time period, Bennett and Pender narrow the field to include those ‘for whom the expatriate years made a difference, and in some way inspired or enabled their literary careers’ (8). There is no clear attempt to define what is meant by ‘creative’ writing.

It is necessary to fix upon some kind of parameter for inclusion, and Bennett and Pender’s criterion of Australian birth is certainly a firm one. Their professed aim to deal with


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individualistic and eclectic stories seems at odds with their decision, however, as individual stories soon reveal that national allegiance is more complicated than mere birth. Are we to accept that a person not born in Australia is not Australian? Besides the potential issues of discrimination this standpoint raises more generally, it is possible to have lived in an adopted country long enough to tip one’s internal culture balance in the favour of the new country. A second issue raised by Bennett and Pender’s parameters is one of unconscious selection. When answering questions about the significance of expatriatism to writing, only including writers for whom expatriatism had an effect presupposes the answer. Life experiences in general can be said to have an effect on writers, and without a study of all ‘expatriates’ one can never truly quantify the significance of the phenomenon.

Studies like this go a long way to rescue literary histories from the constraints of nationalism. Orthodox Australian literary history has, in the past, offered only two options for Australian writers. There was a choice to be made between nationalism (meaning remaining in Australia and contributing to the national canon while dealing with poor resources and resulting low levels of recognition) and internationalism (meaning either actually leaving and thus revoking one’s ‘Australianess’, or at the very least writing for a global (or British) market that would mean the removal of any local references). The consensus is that one could not be an ‘Australian’ writer and not be in Australia. Expatriatism of writers is generally seen as a loss to the Australian literary canon. This has had the effect of obscuring much of the work of Australian writers merely because they were overseas at the time of writing.

Bennett and Pender do good work to counter this damage that is still far from being undone. There is a focus on writers whose work has been largely ignored in Australia, such as the women romance writers abroad in the early twentieth century (Rosa Praed, Louise Mack, etc). Aside from being unknown, another fate that befell Australian expatriate writers was harsh treatment at the hands of their compatriots. Germaine Greer and Barry Humphries were well acquainted with the ‘venom’ directed at expatriate writers by fellow Australians because they were seen as guilty of some kind of betrayal. Humphries illustrated this by ‘defining the word “expatriate” as “traitor” in his glossary of Australian words’ (108). Christina Stead was another who ‘suffered’ for the crime of leaving, especially because her books were set in many different places (122), and reportedly was bitterly disappointed to miss out on the Brittanica Australia Award for Literature in 1967 because she was not seen as contributing to Australian literature (132). It would require more systematic study to determine whether the authors’ perceptions of Australian reactions are the result of a certain defensiveness leading to oversensitivity in this area, or if in fact expatriate writers were the recipients of an above average amount of vitriol.

Further assumptions about expatriates are examined by Bennett and Pender with interesting results. There are contrasting themes of escaping from a provincial, anti-artistic society only to find oneself trapped in another equally unfriendly one. Many came to the realisation that the ‘old world’ was not necessarily an improvement. The sheer weight of tradition and centuries of cultural accumulation in Europe could be oppressive, and the irreverent attitude of the clichéd Australian newcomer was not necessarily enough to counter this.

As a resource of information about writers who spent considerable portions of their life overseas, this is excellent. Like most of the other attempts to tackle literary expatriatism it has its methodological limitations, but has gone further than previous ones to remedy the issues surrounding this subject. The authors’ professed desire to explore individual stories

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without being tied to an oppressive theme or ‘generalising fantas[y]’ (2) allows for much that is interesting to be included, as well as nuanced discussion of the subjects’ literary works. It also allows for the much more sensible conclusion that the forces acting on writers who became expatriates were many and varied, rather than the inevitable result of the struggle to be a writer in Australia’s unpromising environment.

Helen Bones