

# Making Oz Lit

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Richard Nile  
 THE MAKING OF THE  
 AUSTRALIAN LITERARY IMAGINATION  
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REVIEWERS OF THE last batch of Australian literary histories rightly asked in what sense such works can be considered 'historical'. After reading the second Oxford history, David Carter even wondered if literary critics were the best people, after all, to write literary history, or whether the job should be left to professional historians. It's perhaps unsurprising, then, that among the most satisfyingly 'historical' chapters in *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia* (1988) and *The Oxford Literary History of Australia* (1998) were those written by historian Richard Nile. Nile's new book, *The Making of the Australian Literary Imagination*, is an elaboration of those highly regarded chapters. Its importance lies in its innovative approach to the problem of writing literary history.

Part of the problem has been that literary critics don't normally think about literature as a commercial institution. This is why it can be so unsettling to move from literary history to books about other cultural industries. Tom O'Regan's *Australian National Cinema* (1996), for example, to which Nile refers as one model for his own book, approaches Australian cinema as a 'quasi-object' — that is, a hybrid assemblage of personnel, discourses, practices and representations. Because it is so highly dispersed, it makes no sense to see it as a coherent field expressing a single organising principle, though some inside the industry will believe that it has one. It makes no sense, either, to describe it from the perspective of only one of its parts, such as cinema criticism. Like Australian literature, Australian cinema is an industry shaped by markets, policies, regulations and consumers; it is a set of self-representations; it is a (changing) canon of texts and a body of criticism about those texts. To describe such a disaggregated object, the historian must be interdisciplinary, using a variety of descriptive techniques including industry analysis, statistical analysis, biography and textual criticism.

For reasons that run deep in the history of English studies, literary critics have tended not to see Australian literature as a dispersed object. Although there is now some excellent work on the history of the book and the history of reading formations, the major Australian literary histories have been written according to the principles of literary criticism, which tends to aestheticise its object. The key to Richard Nile's innovative approach is that he does not do this. He is not in the business of literary criticism or the evaluative ranking of

different kinds of writing; rather, these were the practices of the writers and critics who are the subject of his history.

Like O'Regan, Nile divides his book into groups of numerous short chapters, each dealing with a different aspect of the national literature from the perspective most appropriate to that task. His first section, 'The Culture Takers', describes the legislative and corporate structure of publishing from the British cartel of 1896 to the corporate takeovers of the late twentieth century. Nile debunks the myths, revealing that cultural nationalist assumptions about Australian literature are an artefact of the period under study, not an objective tool of historical analysis, still less a set of absolute values against which that history can or should be judged. As O'Regan found with Australian cinema, publishing in Australia has always been part of an international economy and 'Australia is a culture taker, more so than a culture maker'. The goals of literary nationalism have never been practicable. Even Angus & Robertson, which professed an interest in 'doing something ... for Australia', was always entirely dependent on commercial imperatives that were 'indifferent to any claims of nationalism'. The facts are that most of the major nationalist writers — including Katharine Susannah Prichard, M. Barnard Eldershaw, Miles Franklin and Vance Palmer — published their first books overseas, and it was only later that A&R offered to take them on and buy up rights to their earlier works.

In a second section, 'Creative Industries', Nile examines literature's relation to competing culture industries, including journalism, theatre, radio, television and cinema. He writes a marvellous history of the paperback in its international contexts, from the early Bookstall Company, to Penguin and Sun Books, and traces the commercial triumph of the novel through to its eventual displacement by cinema in the 1970s.

The key to Nile's approach is the word 'making' in his title: the national literature is and has always been an invention. It is important, then, to ask how and why this dispersed object acquired its imaginary coherence. This is the theme of Nile's third section, 'Canons and Contexts'. He describes the invention of the 'Australian tradition' and its canon, initially by public intellectuals like the Palmers, and then by a new generation of professional academic critics. These were the 'literary élites' who 'worked hard to invent and maintain' the idea of a national literature. Nile offers a compelling account of how that tradition required the othering of commercial writing if it were to be ennobled as high art. Vance Palmer, for example, ridiculed 'commercial' writers such as Frank Clune and Ion Idriess, and worked hard to reinvent himself, burying his populist alter-ego Rann Daly in his own 'amnesic past' in favour of his preferred self-image as a serious, bow-tie wearing man of letters. For his part, Idriess did not 'pontificate on the creation of Australian culture through literature'; in fact, he thought that people like Palmer were out of touch with reality. Even as the cultural nationalist project was being invented, there were some who could see it for what it was. As the cosmopolitan Jack Lindsay complained, Australian

writing, by mid-century, had become overly influenced by those 'who would uphold a national basis in expression'.

In the final section, 'Literary Democracy', Nile examines literature's relation to the various government agencies that have sought either to patronise or constrain it, laying out succinctly what he calls 'the political economy of writing'. Tracing the history of government patronage in its various guises from the CLF to the Literature Fund, he argues that its objectives have evolved through three phases: from early welfare grants to the families of 'dead white males', to the nation-building ideals of mid-century, to the present support for individual, commercially successful writers. 'Arguably,' Nile concludes, 'the Literature Board became as captive to celebrity as the CLF had been to the older style nationalism.'

Nile's survey of Australian literature ends, as it begins, by defamiliarising its object. Cultural nationalism was not the natural and absolute horizon of values that generations of writers and critics took it to be: it was, as those outside its field of power always knew, an invention. Finally, Nile suggests, it is likely that the values and institutions that brought 'the Australian literary imagination' into being as a cultural myth have now transformed themselves in ways that will no longer sustain it. One indication of this may be that in December 2002 Peter Carey ended his twenty-year relationship with UQP, signing up to publish his next book with Knopf. It is therefore possible that Nile has given us the first history of Australian literature to be written after the moment of its passing.

At one point in his history of the publishing industry, Nile rightly laments the decline in contemporary standards of copy-editing. It is a pity to have to end this review by observing that the large number of typographical errors in his own book bears this out. Many of them, such as misspelled or missing words, are merely irritating. Others are more serious, especially in a work that is otherwise historically authoritative.

## MARCH HIGHLIGHTS

### **Art and Art History**

Patrick McCaughey: An Essay on Fred Williams  
 Daniel Thomas on Robert Klippel  
 Evelyn Juers on Albert Namatjira  
 Edwina Preston on Brett Whiteley  
 Angus Trumble on Charles Conder

Other contributors include: Mary Eagle, Morag Fraser, Miles Lewis, Christopher Menz, Jason Smith, George Tibbits and Chris Wallace-Crabbe