Australian Letters and Postwar Modernity

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AUSTRALIAN Letters, 'a quarterly review of writing and criticism', was launched in Adelaide in 1957. Max Harris, co-owner of the Mary Martin Bookshop, poet Geoffrey Dutton and Bryn Davies (both members of the English Department at Adelaide University) were its initial editors. In 1963, on Davies's resignation, Rosemary Wighton joined the team, the only woman involved in editing a literary magazine in Australia at that time.

This journal was one of an extraordinary range of literary enterprises undertaken by Harris and Dutton, who together played a major role in establishing a robust literary culture in postwar Australia. They had been undergraduates together at Adelaide University and co-editors (along with 'Sam' Kerr and Paul Pfeiffer) of Angry Penguins in its first incarnation as a university Arts Association journal, published from 1940 to 1942 (Miles 13). Passionate about modernist poetry, each published his first book while in his early 20s. Dutton, after serving in the RAAF during the war, took a BA at Oxford, and then travelled extensively in Europe, making a wide variety of literary contacts, before returning to Adelaide in 1951. In 1956 he took up a lectureship in the English Department at Adelaide University. Harris, as is well known, had taken Angry Penguins to Melbourne where it was published by the arts patron John Reed and where, in 1944, it became the unfortunate target of the Ern Malley hoax. Although his co-editors at the time were Reed and Sidney Nolan, Harris bore the brunt of this scandal when he was prosecuted, in Adelaide, for publishing obscene writing. By the mid-1950s he was running the Mary Martin Bookshop and publishing the satirical monthly, Mary's Own Paper, and occasional issues of Ern Malley's Journal (the name of which signalled his refusal to be silenced by the hoax).¹

The Harris-Dutton partnership turned their hands to numerous successful literary enterprises. They not only published Australian Letters for 11 years from 1957 to 1968, but during this time they also published an annual collection, Verse in

¹ My thanks to Dr Betty Snowden for her comments on my account of Max Harris in an earlier draft of this paper.
Australia. In 1961, with Brian Stonier, they set up Penguin Australia. After four years they were fed up with the British firm’s half-hearted attitude to some of their most exciting commissioned works – Robin Boyd’s *The Australian Ugliness* and Donald Horne’s *The Lucky Country* (Dutton, *Out in the Open* 294–95). Nothing daunted, they established Sun Books, bringing out in paperback a number of important new non-fiction titles and reprints of novels as diverse and important as Christina Stead’s *The Salzburg Tales*, Henry Handel Richardson’s *Maurice Guest* and Elizabeth Harrower’s *The Long Prospect*. In 1961, as well, with Rosemary Wighton they established the *Australian Book Review*, which ran in this first series until 1973.

Dutton was a founding member of the Writers Week Committee for the first Adelaide Festival of Arts in 1960. He also played an important role in the growth in university teaching of Australian literature, through his work as editor of affordable paperback collections. After his resignation from the English Department in 1962 he was responsible for the Australian Writers and Their Work series for Oxford University Press (1962–66), the 1964 reference work *The Literature of Australia* (Penguin) and the 1966 Fontana/Collins anthology *Modern Australian Writing*. As for Max Harris, during the 1960s, in addition to his involvement with *Australian Letters*, *Australian Book Review* and other publishing, he began a thirty-year career as a journalist, writing columns for newspapers and periodicals including the *Australian*, Adelaide’s *Sunday Mail* and the *Bulletin*. He also chaired ‘The Critics’ panel on ABC television from 1962 to 1972 (Ward 6).

When *Australian Letters* was launched it joined a flourishing population of literary magazines that included *Meanjin, Southerly, Overland, Quadrant* and *Westerly*. Although it did not align itself along the Left-Right continuum of Cold War cultural politics, it maintained good enough relations with both the Left-wing journals, *Meanjin* and *Overland*, to initiate an offer of joint subscriptions – all three magazines for four pounds a year (advertisement, *AL* 3.1, July 1960). In practice *Australian Letters* was closest to *Meanjin* in outlook, being similarly committed to openness and eclecticism. Indeed, it came under attack from the Right for its lack of tendentiousness. In 1959 the editors defended its non-aligned position against accusations from ‘certain Catholic right-wing intellectuals’ (no doubt James McAuley, then editor of *Quadrant*) that they were merely ‘moral dilettantes’: ‘We are trying to give expression to the general cultural vitality and variety of Australian life,’ they wrote, ‘without imposing any political belief, religious bigotry or clique ambitiousness of our own’ (Editorial, *AL* 2.1, June 1959).

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2 Sun Books became the publisher of *Australian Letters*, and published *The Vital Decade* (edited by Dutton and Harris).
Australian Letters was proud of its financial as well as its political and intellectual independence. It claimed to be ‘a freak in Australian literary publishing – a quarterly which pays its own way’ (Editorial, AL 3.1, July 1960). Its business was conducted from the Mary Martin Bookshop and there is no evidence that the University of Adelaide ever supported it, as the University of Western Australia supported Westerly and the University of Melbourne gave house room to Meanjin. Nor was it subsidised by political or professional associations, as Overland, Quadrant and Southerly were. It did begin to receive a small Commonwealth Literary Fund grant of 250 pounds from 1961, which it vowed to spend entirely on paying contributors.\(^3\) It survived by ‘advertisements, donations, subscriptions, and sales through the Mary Martin Bookshop’, according to Dutton (Out in the Open 354).\(^4\) As the editors all had other jobs, the magazine operated on a different basis from those with solo full-time editors, like Christesen of Meanjin, although no-one associated with these literary magazines seems to have received pay for their work.\(^5\) Its initial annual subscription cost 30 shillings, cheaper than Meanjin at 40 shillings but much more expensive than Overland at 10 shillings.

As for its aesthetic principles, as a somewhat eccentric proponent of artistic modernism, Australian Letters allows us new insights into postwar modernity. Its most significant innovation was the series of artist-poet collaborations the journal commissioned and published from October 1960 onwards. All the most prominent artists of this great era of Australian painting contributed works inspired by, or made in response to, the poetry of one of their literary contemporaries. These paintings appeared on the cover of the magazine as well as inside, reproduced in colour on glossy paper. They are, deservedly, the major feature of The Vital Decade, a handsome anthology of the journal’s best contributions which Dutton and Harris published in 1968, to mark their decision to cease its publication.

At first glance Australian Letters, with its combination of art and writing, seems set to continue the Angry Penguins’ mission of ‘creating an Australian taste for the new styles and techniques’ across the arts (Tregenza 73). Yet Max Harris himself denied that Australian Letters had any specifically avant-gardist ambitions: he explained that it belonged in a very different cultural climate from the wartime ferment that had been the Angry Penguins’ moment. Then, Penguins had aspired

\(^3\) Tregenza (77, 83) reports that at this time (from 1958) both Meanjin and Southerly received 1000 pounds p.a. from the Commonwealth Literary Fund. Overland (begun 1954) got nothing for its first ten years, but Westerly (begun 1956) got an 800 pound establishment grant.

\(^4\) Its survival was precarious at times: a statement of account for 1963 in the Dutton papers shows a loss of 412 pounds. There is no breakdown of receipts. If the CLF subsidy was only 250, they must have taken 1900 pounds in advertisements, subscriptions and donations. Dutton Papers, NLA MS 7285 Series 3, Folders 10-11.

\(^5\) Clem Christesen devoted all his time to Meanjin, but complained in a letter to Judith Wright that he never even received expenses, far less a salary. Judith Wright file, CC to JW 18/5/53. Meanjin Archive, University of Melbourne Library.
to nourish ‘international modernism’ in Australia, but now (he wrote in 1963) Australian Letters was attempting a new kind of ‘Australianism’ – ‘moderate and mature’ – to replace the ‘gumleaf romanticism’ that Angry Penguins had so vehemently opposed. Australian Letters, he asserted, adopted the principle of ‘cultural self-containedness’, ‘neither nationalistic nor anti-nationalistic’ (Harris, ‘Angry Penguins and After’ 9–10).

The other important aspect of the ‘self-conscious modernism’ and ‘fierce experimentalism’ that Angry Penguins had stood for in the 1940s was its championing of free expression. This, too, Harris felt, was no longer relevant. Writing in his erstwhile enemy McAuley’s Quadrant in 1963, Harris stated that the worst of the 1940s cultural isolation and illiberalism was over, and he attacked as anachronistic the sexually and aesthetically radical journal Evergreen Review (‘Angry Penguins and After’ 5), which had been initiated in the United States in 1957 by Grove, a press that specialised in testing censorship laws by publishing such titles as Henry Miller’s The Tropic of Cancer. Australian Letters might have taken up an overtly anti-censorship stance, given Harris’s experience of prosecution, and the extremely repressive regime of literary and artistic censorship of anything sexual that prevailed in Australia at that time. Yet the magazine did not court trouble on that front, and it was only after it had ceased publication that Dutton and Harris brought out Australia’s Censorship Crisis in 1969.

In ‘Angry Penguins and After: A Contribution to our Literary History’ Harris attempted to define the magazine’s aesthetic differences from its rivals, midway through its eleven-year life span. Yet when you consider the range of writers that all six literary journals published in the years 1957–68, the differences are not so great. Many writers published in all of them. Meanjin was by no means confined – as Max Harris accused it of being – to ‘Lawson-to-Vance-Palmer’ styles of realism (‘Angry Penguins and After’ 10). Quadrant’s literary contributors included people who did not share its vehement anti-communism and anti-modernism. Although Dutton claimed to have been the first to publish Peter Carey, and the first to take on Frank Moorhouse’s sexually daring stories (Out in the Open 242), these new writers and others like Peter Mathers also appear in the supposedly prim and proper Southerly from the late 1950s onwards. Australian Letters also published a short story by Dorothy Hewett, ‘the first of my stories to be published in a non-left journal’, when she was still a member of the Communist Party but ‘already making an attempt to break away from the iron-bound strictures of socialist realism’ (Hewett, Introduction 4).

Along with new and neglected writers, Australian Letters published the greats: Patrick White and Christina Stead. It was eclectic in the best sense, but not narrowly avant-garde. Indeed, Harris criticised those earlier ‘avant-garde’ ranks
to which he had belonged in the 1940s for having been too tight and exclusive to recognise the ‘lone and magnificent talents’ of a Drysdale, a Slessor, or the early Patrick White (‘Angry Penguins and After’ 7). The inclusiveness that 

*Australian Letters* aimed for is consistent with David Carter’s (1991) argument that all the Australian journals of this postwar period shared an ambition to be both ‘international’ and ‘contemporary’.

Yet the magazine did other interesting things, worth a closer look, which contributed in conventional and unconventional ways to that ‘vital decade’ of growth in Australian cultural institutions. It was different from its rivals, but not by virtue of having a more obvious commitment to literary experiment and innovation. Stephen Murray-Smith, the editor of *Overland*, reviewing *The Vital Decade* in 1968, seems to me to get it right when he wrote that *Australian Letters* was not experimental but it had ‘a cheekiness and an aplomb which were badly needed in this somewhat self-conscious field’. It was never ‘po-faced about poetry or anything else’. He thought its poetry editing showed all that was best about this magazine – ‘intellectually generous’, ‘unstuffy’. But he questioned the ‘cosmopolitan up-with-Ionesco line’ they pursued, because it really only amounted to inviting contributions from ‘the Poms’, he said, and *they* showed themselves to have little feeling for their subjects: Richard Aldington on Slessor, even Frank Kermode on Brennan. He thought Alistair Kershaw’s piece, ‘The Last Expatriate’, which was the occasion for White’s influential ‘Prodigal Son’, to be ‘febrile and anachronistic’. In fact, none of these contributions, nor those invited from American critics, was intellectually cutting edge stuff. And nothing remotely like Ionesco’s Theatre of the Absurd appeared in the pages of *Australian Letters*. However, the July 1960 issue of the journal contains an impressive range of writing published in Britain about the arts in Australia, including Kenneth Clarke on Nolan, F.H. Mares on Judith Wright, an article on the Adelaide Festival from *The Listener*, and Max Harris’s talk for the BBC Third Programme.

What was most impressive about this journal was the way poetry and short fiction rubbed shoulders with reproductions of specially commissioned artworks. Australian artists, many of them known personally to Max Harris and Geoffrey Dutton, were invited to produce works out of their reflections or meditations on the work of an individual writer. They included Charles Blackman on John Shaw Neilson (the only non-living poet included), Arthur Boyd on Harris, John Brack on Chris Wallace-Crabbe, Lawrence Daws on Dutton, Russell Drysdale on David Campbell, Leonard French on James McAuley, Donald Friend on Douglas Stewart, as well as the pairs mentioned below. Dutton was adamant that the paintings were autonomous works, not merely ‘illustrations’, although that is the term used in *The Vital Decade*. The dashing and sometimes slapdash style of the Harris-Dutton partnership also means that, frustratingly, there are none of the usual details given,
either in *The Vital Decade* or when they first appeared in *Australian Letters*, about the materials and size of the paintings.\(^6\)

Most of the pairings are sensitive, some of them inspired. Sidney Nolan’s paintings for Randolph Stow’s poems include one that accompanies a poem dedicated to him, entitled ‘The Land’s Meaning’. Below a thin rim of blue sky, bare hills in red-brown and ochre sprout ghostly bare plants (*The Vital Decade* 83).

Stow’s poem concerns the metaphysics of a desert landscape where ‘the love of man is a weed of the waste places,’ ‘the spinifex of dry souls’. While only two Nolan paintings in this style are included in *The Vital Decade*, there are numerous others of desert and tropical landscapes in Stow’s book *Outrider: Poems 1956–62*. It was obviously a successful meeting of minds.

The first poet-painter pair to appear were Clifton Pugh and Judith Wright, in the October 1960 *Australian Letters* (3.2). Several of Wright’s then recent bird poems are accompanied by drawings which appear to be crayon or charcoal. In *The Vital Decade* the image we find accompanying the poem ‘Egrets’ is two white egrets posed in a black, grey and red landscape (*The Vital Decade* 139). It appears to be an oil painting, more in keeping with other works in this series.

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\(^6\) We use the images from *The Vital Decade*, in which publication they appear without acknowledgement or documentation of ownership.
Only two women poets are included in the series of 18. The other is Rosemary Dobson, and her poem ‘The Cry’ is accompanied by a work by Ray Crooke (over page *The Vital Decade* 113).

Crooke’s tropical-toned landscape, with a monumental female figure in the foreground, reminiscent of Gauguin’s style, does not at first seem to resonate with her words about ‘waiting for a sign’, in the midst of ordinary life, of some ‘celestial’ poetry. Yet Crooke designed the dust jacket for her 1965 collection, *Cock Crow*, and Dobson would later write a sensitive appreciation of his art at the invitation of the University of Queensland Press for its series on Queensland artists. The poet and the painter shared a love of the early Italian painters, especially Giorgione and the ‘attentiveness and receptiveness’ of his figures in a landscape (Dobson 24). It is the emotional attitude of waiting, then, that Crooke must have responded to.7

Only one female painter is included in the series, the Adelaide artist Jacqueline Hick.8 Hick’s powerful work, entitled ‘Recurring Theme’,9 of several abstract human figures in dark greens and reds carrying a prone white body, has Christ-like overtones (*The Vital Decade* 117). It accompanies Bruce Dawe’s ‘One Winter’. This poem, about a man ‘out of work and money’ who takes to stealing

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7 This ‘partnership’ was chosen by *Australian Letters*, as Dobson recalls in an interview with John Tranter (www.austlit.com/a/dobson/2004-iv-tranter.html. Accessed 5 Oct. 2006). A letter to Dobson from Hal Porter (26 Apr. 1964) refers to their shared admiration for Drysdale’s work, and indicates that Drysdale was an earlier choice to be paired with Dobson (Dobson Papers, NLA 4955, Folder 15).
8 There were, however, works by Joy Hester and Mirka Mora included in *Australian Letters* 4.1 (1961) and 4.2 (1962) respectively.
9 This image was kindly identified for me by Hick expert, Dr Paula Furby.
milk and bread off people’s doorsteps and burning the furniture in his rented room to keep warm, might recall Hick’s satirical paintings, but this particular work is more abstract and fails, I think, to create real synergies with the poem.

Despite some less than successful matches, however, the series was a brilliant innovation which must have introduced the work of many contemporary artists to
the literary readership of *Australian Letters*. As the 1960s marked an unprecedented demand in the Australian art market for contemporary work as a form of investment (Smith 347), such exposure was no doubt advantageous to the artists. However, as far as one can tell from Dutton’s papers, none of them was paid for these photographic images of their paintings. It is unlikely that *Australian Letters* ever had the originals, although Dutton expressed the hope, in his Introduction to *The Vital Decade*, that ‘the originals will be kept together in one of Australia’s National Galleries’. According to Peter Ward, the Harris-Boyd pair, presented to the Barr Smith Library at Adelaide University by Max Harris, is the only complete set that still exists (Ward 6).

With such images adorning its covers, and its high production values, *Australian Letters* might have based its reputation entirely on that combination of the arts of
painting and poetry. But before the poet-painter series began, the journal covered a much wider range of writing than its competitors. Its aim was to ‘appeal to as wide a range of readers as possible’, and to mix its literary contents with articles on other subjects that were ‘part of the experience of living in Australia’, Dutton wrote in a ‘Statement’ in 1981 (254). This ambition is especially evident in the first few years of its existence, from 1957 to 1960. The first issue included an article on how to lay down a wine cellar for 10 pounds a year. This, as Dutton points out in the Introduction to The Vital Decade, ‘could have been a hommage to all those manuscripts and editorial brainwaves that were later christened with claret’. There were articles on leisure pursuits, a symposium on Australian humour, and profiles of show business ‘personalities’ including Leo McKern, Bill Harney and Jack Davey of Pick-a-Box fame – as well as Barry Humphries. There was a regular checklist of new Australian books, reviews of sound recordings, and articles on the non-literary arts. The Vital Decade attempts to give some of this flavour, as it includes articles on aspects of historical popular culture – Randolph Stow on Cole’s Funny Picture Book and Rosemary Wighton on C.J. Dennis’s The Gadfly.

All this set Australian Letters at some distance from its rivals. One reviewer of The Vital Decade attributed to the editors a ‘flair for catching [literary] reputations before they reached their peak’ – he gave the examples of White, Harrower, Stow, and the Stead revival – as well as being just ahead of fashions, such as ‘winesmanship’, colonial architecture and ‘pop culture’ (Mares). This flair, together with its ‘decorative’ appearance (McLaren 158–59) and lack of interest in literary theory and analysis, attracted criticism from literary scholars and fellow editors alike. Yet this, I would suggest, now looks like its main claim to fame – representing a new postwar modernity that brought the arts of living and the creative arts into contact, if not into conversation. In practice if not in principle, this magazine defined itself in terms of an aesthetics of everyday life, or what we might now call ‘lifestyle’.

A literary magazine that carried advertising for Penfolds Wines, TAA airlines and John Martins department store, as well as for the Times Literary Supplement, ABC subscription concerts and book publishers, was unique, at least in Australia. Stephen Murray-Smith pointed out that ‘the advertisements played the role with this magazine that subsidies have played for Meanjin and donations from readers for Overland’. Dutton said that he had ‘used [his] Adelaide Club connections to persuade half a dozen Adelaide businessmen’ and the local newspaper, the Advertiser, to take advertisements (Out in the Open 213). A comparison between the Party faithful supporting Overland, and the Adelaide Establishment supporting Australian Letters is piquant. And it is not just this journal’s connection with the Big End of Town that is striking. That connection was shared by Quadrant, which carried advertisements, during 1964 for example, from BHP, General Motors Holden, Cadburys and other major Australian companies. Such advertising signals
awareness on the part of these companies of the value of acquiring symbolic capital by association with cultural institutions. But in *Australian Letters* what is striking is the range of consumer goods and services that these advertisements summon up – an audience who might be expected to travel interstate by plane, to attend symphony concerts, and to buy wine as well as books. They might easily be expected to buy paintings as well.

It was for this journal that Patrick White wrote ‘The Prodigal Son’, his much-quoted attack on the ‘dun-coloured realism’ of Australian literature and the gross materialism of postwar consumer society that greeted him when he returned in the late 1940s:

> In all directions stretched the Great Australian Emptiness, in which the mind is the least of possessions, in which the rich man is the important man, in which ... the buttocks of cars grow hourly glassier, food means steak and cake, muscles prevail, and the march of material ugliness does not raise a quiver from the average nerves. *(AL* 1.3, 1958: 38)

As a counterweight to this, *Australian Letters* demonstrates an aesthetics of living that could transform that gross materialism into something more refined, as well as promoting the many contemporary alternatives to dun-coloured realist writing.

*Australian Letters* was also interested in the aesthetics of advertising, and at one point proposed to offer a prize for the most innovative advertisement submitted to its pages. No more was heard of this offer, so it may have been a product of those wine-splattered editorial meetings that Dutton mentions, a suggestion never realised. The magazine’s interest in design suggests a possible comparison with *The Home* *(1920–1942)*, although that famous Sydney Ure Smith production was addressed mainly to women readers, and concentrated on graphic arts, design and architecture. The postwar difference of *Australian Letters* was its attention to the non-domestic arts of living, and its apparently non-gendered address. But in fact these feature articles on the *non*-domestic arts of living – on shark fishing, racing and beer – ensured that the magazine was still rather blokey, albeit in a middle-class style. Perhaps a closer comparison might be with *Playboy* of the period – a magazine which then published quality fiction and features on other male leisure pursuits as well as sex.

Male artists and writers are over-represented in *Australian Letters*, as was the case with all the magazines of the period. Yet alone among its rivals, *Australian Letters* could boast a female co-editor: Rosemary Wighton was an expert on children’s literature who taught in an Adelaide teachers college and would eventually become Chair of the Literature Board and Women’s Advisor to the Premier of South
Australian. *Australian Letters* was marginally more welcoming to new women writers: as well as Dorothy Hewett, it published poetry and a fine article on Francois Webb by Sylvia Lawson. Max Harris greatly admired Judith Wright, seeing her as the best hope for Australian poetry against the domination of the academy (‘Conflicts’ 31). He also greatly admired Elizabeth Harrower’s fiction, placing her in the same league as White and Stow (*AL* 4.2, 1961: 16–18). *Australian Letters* published several of her short stories, which are also anthologised in *The Vital Decade* and in *Modern Australian Writing* (1966).

Both Dutton and Harris actually liked clever women and enjoyed their company. And because they saw themselves as defending inclusiveness and innovation against the exclusivists and anti-modernists like McAuley, they were no doubt more inclined to welcome unknown writers they liked, including often-difﬁdent women. Each in his own way affected a kind of populist belief in ‘ordinary people’ and their interest in the new. For instance, Dutton’s view of the conflict over contemporary art in Sydney was that ‘It was the Lindseys and Douglas Stewart who objected to Picasso and Klee; the President of the Housewives Association was prepared to give them a go’ (*The Innovators* 129).\(^{10}\)

Harris’s attack on what he saw as the suffocating influence of academic poets (‘Conflicts’ 27–30) indicates the distance that *Australian Letters* kept from the universities. Its own ties were cut when Dutton resigned from the university in 1962 and Davies (himself by no means a conventional academic) resigned from the editorial group. *Australian Letters* was distinguished by its lack of academic respectability. Reviewers of *The Vital Decade* agreed that the critical articles were relatively weak, and they all comment on the editorial sloppiness, the lack of documentation about the contributions, notes on the authors and so on (Hergenhahn 303, for example). Scholarly reviewers praised the creative writing, though some were less than impressed by the amount of space devoted to Patrick White: ‘too much White, good though it is’, wrote Mares, while Leonie Kramer detected ‘a critical tone’ in White’s ‘withering short stories’ (24). Such comments indicate the deep-set conservatism of many English Department critics at the time.

G.K.W. Johnston, reviewing the sixth issue of *Australian Letters* in the *Observer*, accused the editors of a ‘lack of critical responsibility and rigour’ and also of ‘Parochialism – it could easily be called ‘Adelaide Letters’.’\(^{11}\) ‘A certain cosy cult of personality reminds one irresistibly of *Angry Penguins,*’ he added (25). A different accusation of parochialism came from Thea Astley, who wrote to her

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\(^{10}\) This is probably a reference to Portia Geach (1873–1959), artist and feminist (see *ADB* 8, 1981: 634–35).

\(^{11}\) The journal published negatively critical articles on the work of A.D. Hope and McAuley (*AL* 2.2 and 2.3, 1959).
friend, the writer Laurence Collinson, referring to the ‘personal’ nature of Rosemary Wighton’s attack (in *Australian Book Review*) on her prize-winning 1962 novel *The Well-Dressed Explorer*: ‘I think this country with its literary cliques stinks.’ In another letter to Collinson, she told how she fell out with Patrick White over the ‘Dutton Harris Wighton triumvirate’ – in their guise as Penguin Australia – having refused to take on *The Well-Dressed Explorer* for a paperback edition.

*Australian Letters* might have been parochial – anything is, depending on one’s angle of vision – but it was connected, through its editors’ activities, to all the most vital movements in Australian literary culture of the 1950s and 1960s. Yet even this was cause for suspicion in some quarters. Poet Geoffrey Lehmann professed not to understand how Max Harris could write a ‘fine and beautiful poem’ such as ‘The Circus’, yet ‘in his column every Saturday mixes cultural PR with attacks on the RSL in a way that lowers standards’ (85). Although we might now see that ‘cultural PR’ was the coming thing, cleverly anticipated by Dutton and Harris, perhaps it was what many readers in the 1960s distrusted about them. They were very good at it, and apparently indefatigable.

As for the magazine itself, Stephen Murray Smith tries to put his finger on its distinctive tone, in his review of *The Vital Decade*:

*Australian Letters* gave us new standards of urbanity and a new sophistication, but there was something slightly off-hand about it, like a drawing master’s correcting his apprentice’s crude scralls. Without wishing to be didactic, it was nevertheless an exercise de haut en bas. *Overland* and *Meanjin*, far more didactic in editorial intent, nevertheless manage to create something of an air of mutual engagement and concern between reader and magazine. An odd paradox. (7)

Not so odd, perhaps, since those other journals knew who their readers were. *Australian Letters* lobbed in from the periphery, not – like its contemporary *Westerly* – as a specifically regional magazine, but as a national one. When the edge speaks as if it were the centre, perhaps it can sound like an utterance de haut en bas. But ‘off-hand’ is more like its tone, I think: as if they’re saying, ‘These are things we value and find interesting. Join us if you like them too.’

Murray-Smith’s comment suggests that although *Australian Letters* seemed to be very laid back and inclusive, perhaps its ideal audience was missing. It often failed to satisfy readers looking for the aesthetic and political high seriousness they expected from the literary quarterlies. *Australian Letters* was ahead of its times. It ushered in the styles of the 1970s, which were marked by expanding boundaries of personal and political expression – the sort of styles associated with the Dunstan government in South Australia (1967 and 1970–79) and the Whitlam
years (1972–75). But at the same time it was ‘of the establishment’ and out of the reach of most of the younger generation, who were beginning, in the late 1960s, to create their own channels of communication (see Vickery, for instance).

What preceded and to some extent enabled this cultural expansion was the economic growth of the postwar years, bringing with it more democratic access not only to housing, transport and consumer goods but also to services ranging from extended public education to an unprecedented expansion of communications. The other enabling factor was the radical political break with the past, symbolised by the anti-war movement that emerged in the late 1960s. With this ‘great thaw’ in Australian cultural and social life began a long-term radicalisation of sexual and social mores that even Bohemians like Dutton and Harris had not envisaged. Although the radical political moment was all but finished by 1972, when the new federal Labor government was voted in on the tail of a brief but heady period of steeply rising affluence, a new cultural formation had emerged. This new culture of consumption ultimately swamped expectations of a radical break with the past, but it was consonant with the aesthetics of everyday life that Australian Letters had anticipated in the early 1960s.

Older values of economic restraint and aesthetic purity were coming under pressure from affluence and embellishment. This is one of the oppositions that is said to characterise the advent of postmodernity, one that can also be expressed in more materialist terms. As Rita Felski puts it, we can now see that ‘a culture of consumption has informed the longue durée of modernity’, and that such moments of change are more fruitfully seen ‘within the long history of modernity rather than as a radical break with that history’ (60–61). Over 50 years down the track from its inception, then, I suggest that Australian Letters represents a crossover point between consumerism and the arts, one of several in this ‘long history’ of modernity. The journal now can be seen in its historical specificity as a new synthesis of the creative arts and the arts of living, one that is characteristic of postwar modernity. Indeed, Australian Letters’ interest in the aesthetics of everyday life as well as the arts, and its embrace of some aspects of popular culture, gives it a more contemporary ‘feel’ today than any of its rival magazines.

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