

Wandering Scholars in Europe

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NEARLY EVERY YEAR, somewhere in Europe and its offshore islands, you can find a more-or-less academic gathering mainly concerned with Australia's literary culture, its films and, to lesser extents, its politics and history. The umbrella title will be Australian Studies; there is a European Association for Studies on Australia (EASA), British and American associations ditto, a dedicated special centre in Barcelona, as well as scattered programmes run by enthusiasts everywhere from Sofia to Aarhus.

For all their purposes, 'Australian Studies' remains comfortably undefined. This collection, coming out of the 1999 EASA conference in Toulouse, suggests almost unbounded accommodation. Large themes are stated at the outset, beginning with George Seddon's discussion of issues for the future of the Pilbara, and Keith McConnochie's argument for sophisticated innovation on the parts of indigenous Australia's ice-age ancestors. Macroeconomics, natural resources, tourism, the critique of stereotypes for the near and distant past: these are promising paths into the Australian complex of problems, but they're not followed further.

There are good papers in feminist history (Jane Carey and Ellen Warne), on immigrant writing (Wenche Ommundsen and Donald Pulford), and on cultural policy and cultural objects. Chris McAuliffe offers a really exciting piece, tracking the shifts from class politics to postmodernity in three bands of the late 1970s and early 1980s; this essay is about much more than music.

Two others — from Adi Wimmer, and co-authors Franz Kuna and Petra Strohmaier, all of the University of Klagenfurt — are on film production and film policy, pursuing the long-running European fascination with the Australian feature-film industry over the past three decades. Adi Wimmer does us all a kindness in pronouncing the national identity worry (the old hunt for the bunyip) to be over and finished with, for filmic purposes at least. He rightly perceives that the film and programme-makers' present problems are with holding any kind of ground in nationality (not the same thing at all); he sees that globalising forces in film markets could swamp 'Australian film' as such.

These two essays are discerning and enjoyable, but I hope the authors soon get over the over-hyped art features and give more attention to documentary. Not just because the works of Connolly and Anderson, the Macdougalls and all their tribe are so often better and richer movies, but because, for the purposes of European enquiry, they're also better ways into the puzzles of contemporary Australia.

By contrast, the literary essays, which make up nearly half the book, often seem cooked-up and strained. Rather than give examples (skewering individuals here would be both vicious and irrelevant), I confess to a lifelong scepticism on the institutional separation between literature and history. The challenges of interdisciplinary Australian studies or, for that matter, transnational cultural studies, expose their real interdependence.

Some literary scholars do take history and psychology fully on board, and use them to inform close readings. Noel Rowe's wonderful paper on Francis Webb is structured around his answer to an enquiry about Webb's sexuality. Examining the relevant markers in the poetry, he produces an immaculate comment on the ways in which a writer's biography might matter — or not — to reading and understanding. Given the perennial overrating of biography as principal context, it's a fine contribution.

Helen Thomson's work on Catherine Spence is distinguished, particularly for her insistence that the amazing Spence's disregard of the indigenous population raises complex historical questions that still need to be settled. Susan Pfisterer's paper on the playwrights Mona Brand and Oriel Gray ('Brave Red Witches') is equally welcome, though her enquiry might well have probed further into the reasons why they, with other writers of the mid-century left, have been kept so long in obscurity.

Two other papers, especially, work to upset the dim formulations in the title and subtitle (departing and reinventing are notions you could paint on to any sloppy old conference you like). In Nicole Graham's essay, the only piece in the book that comes from legal studies, she poses 'place' against 'property'. Reviewing the judgment on the Yorta Yorta land claim, she probes the concept of native title, and shows how profoundly radical it actually is, how much of a philosophic challenge to dominant thought. (There is a link here with another important paper given in early 2001 in Barcelona by Robert Grant, of the University of Aberdeen, who explored the notion of a new constitutional order responding to Aboriginal claims.)

The concluding essay is by Dennis McDermott, who speaks from a highly creative mix of understandings; he is both poet and psychologist, and, acknowledgedly, both Aboriginal and Irish. Here literature, identity politics and therapy are worked strenuously together as McDermott considers four Aboriginal poems, not all of them effective in their tasks, in relation to the nature and consequences of trauma.

He argues for a 'poetry of witness' that 'expresses pain in a way that prevents appropriation'; he is thinking of Adorno's stricture on the impossibility of poetry after Auschwitz. In this context, the poem is not an endpoint but a path, a way of entering trauma fully so that it can be left behind. For that, the poem itself must be adequate; the page must be fully read before it can be turned.

These contributions are genuinely, properly disturbing; they invite European students, and indeed others, into the Australias behind the façades. Their goals are in sharp focus, they don't moralise; without trying, they show how we can let foreign students in, honestly, to examine the present back-and-forth struggles between creative cultural action and reactionary politics. They offer materials to deal with the way in which this country has been, in Donald Horne's phrase, 'falling out of its own story'. That theme, efficiently pursued by Horne in *Looking for Leadership*, concerns the betrayal of those tantalising promises which once, long ago in the 1980s and 1990s, attracted students to 'Australia' as object, library, gallery, offering modern kinds of hope: dynamic multiculturalism, the treaty, the coming-to-terms with uncensored histories and actual non-Western geographies. Some students, particularly from the countries of the former Soviet bloc, believed in 'Australia' as that post-colonial West which was precisely not America.

Today's Australia lets them down, but our travelling scholars don't have to.

Of course they'll be working for their own careers; but what they offer should have to do, essentially, with the needs of teachers and students on the ground. International Australian studies will remain eclectic, and should, if anything, be more so; if literature and film inevitably remain privileged foci, there could still be more attention to music and other visual arts, to say nothing of issues in government.

One basic practical step could be taken: we could do much more to ensure that the libraries attached to diplomatic and consular postings become halfway adequate, particularly with respect to history, critical work on society and government, fiction, essays — and a decent spread of journals and magazines. I've strayed into otherwise well-resourced, comfortable Australian corners in foreign cities, and found that the only generalist magazine on the shelf was *Quadrant*; I've also talked to Slovakian and Bulgarian teachers who couldn't even get hold of the Whites or Maloufs they were after. Our governments should be giving these toilers everything they want, on video- and audiotape and in print. They're working for us; they hang on to a certain crazy idealism about this place; and right now, for that reason, we need them.