

# NATIONAL NEWS

AS WE KNOW, *ABR* appears ten times a year, with a feast of reviews and articles on Australia's print culture. Each time, the passionate and professional librarians and bibliographers who are the engine behind AustLit — Australian Literature Gateway ([www.austlit.edu.au](http://www.austlit.edu.au)) — work their way through *ABR*, mining its reviews and articles for Australian literary content. Indeed, AustLit has indexed content from more than 200 issues of *ABR* — from 1973 to the latest issue — and has produced thousands of records about *ABR*-reviewed books. Such records include information about titles, contributors, publishers, editions, formats, genres and literary awards, and detailed subject and settings analysis. Author records include extensive biographical information about writers: names and pseudonyms; gender; place and date of birth and death; any author-claimed cultural heritages; and personal awards. Multiply this process by the more than 10,000 monographs and 1000 or so journals that AustLit has indexed to some extent — including hundreds of comprehensively indexed journals — and AustLit's staggering dimensions and complexity become clearer.

Staggering because AustLit describes nearly 400,000 works of Australian creative and critical writing — written since 1788 — and more than 60,000 Australian authors. No other nation enjoys such a rich record of its national literature. Most developed nations catalogue their book culture through national union catalogues, but none has the equivalent of an AustLit, which not only indexes books at a much deeper level than a standard cataloguing record, but also indexes creative and critical literature and biographical information drawn from a very extensive set of print and electronic journals and websites.

AustLit embodies traditional bibliographic values — dispassionate, accurate and consistent description — together with a special tenacity in tracking down the obscure, or even (in the case of pseudonymous writers) the deliberately obscured. Whether recording a tantalising wisp of information or hunting down yet another of John Clarke's more than sixty known pseudonyms, attention to detail and to cultural and historical context are AustLit's hallmarks.

AustLit's cutting-edge technical infrastructure extends, however, far beyond these values. Unlike traditional print bibliographies or 'companions', AustLit information is stored in a complex and sophisticated database that supports extraordinarily advanced research questions. Many AustLit-users have fairly simple research needs: 'What did Patrick White write?'; 'What has been written about Patrick and his works?' Other researchers can find answers to tougher questions. They can, for instance, retrieve information on all Australian plays written by women claiming indigenous heritage. Or find 'young adult' books where suicide is the subject. Or find out who published in the *Australian Town and*

*Country Journal* (2788 issues between 1870 and 1919), broken down by gender.

AustLit's technical infrastructure also means that AustLit information can be put to a variety of uses. For example, the next volume of the printed *Bibliography of Australian Literature* (A–E appeared in 2001) will be directly produced from AustLit's database, and will require minimal preparation for publication. AustLit information and its growing body of full-text resources can be used by academics designing electronic coursepacks, and, in the future, AustLit's editors hope to work with schools curriculum developers, who are increasingly moving to electronic content sources.

The AustLit Gateway came into being in 2000–1, thanks to the determination of senior Australian academics, librarians and bibliographers to work collaboratively in order to maximise the value of many years of previous biographical and bibliographic research. AustLit's eight contributing universities — the Universities of NSW, Queensland, Western Australia, Sydney, Monash, Flinders, Deakin and Canberra — have invested substantially in technical infrastructure and content development, and AustLit's Board of Editors ensures that AustLit's information priorities are in line with identified research needs. The Australian Research Council made the development of AustLit possible by funding the project over the period 2000–2. AustLit has also benefited enormously from the National Library of Australia's involvement. The NLA has provided significant technical and standards leadership, and support for complex interaction between AustLit and key NLA services, such as PictureAustralia, the Register of Australian Archives and Manuscripts, and the National Bibliographic Database itself.

AustLit is not a free resource, but nor is it a profit-making or even a full-cost recovery service. AustLit's subscription fees are fully reinvested in production of new content, but a large portion of the resources required to produce more than 30,000 quality records each year must still be supplied by AustLit's contributing universities. AustLit is available in most university and state libraries, and AustLit's management continues to work towards innovative consortium arrangements to maximise the reach of this resource — to every Australian student, every member of an Australian public library, and to the tenacious band of overseas teachers and researchers who champion the cause of our national literature across the globe.

AustLit will be formally launched by Dr Brendan Nelson, Minister for Education, Science and Training, at the NLA on 27 August. The launch will provide an opportunity to celebrate the fruits of this truly collaborative endeavour and to honour the uniquely Australian literary culture that AustLit itself memorialises.

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