

Peter Pierce (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2009)

Forty years ago, when I was completing my doctoral thesis in Australian literature, very few comprehensive scholarly studies of that field were available. The large Penguin conspectus *Literature of Australia* had appeared not long before, but there wasn't much else.¹ Since then we have seen the emergence of (among other titles) the *Penguin New Literary History of Australia* (1988), two quite separate versions of the *Oxford History of Australian Literature* (1981 & 1998), the *Oxford Literary Guide to Australia* (1987), the *Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* (1995), and the *Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature* (2000) – to mention only some of the largest multi-author compilations by some of the largest publishers.

To be sure, these and others like them are not quite identical in purpose or scope, and we can readily recognise the sub-generic differences between tomes that label themselves distinctively as guides, companions, critical surveys or histories. But each of them still raises the same set of fundamental questions – three questions in particular.

The first that leaps to the mind of any suspense-driven reader who opens such a volume in a spirit of less than dispassionate critical enquiry is the perennial one about inclusions and exclusions, which in its most ignoble and irrepressible form is simply, 'Am I in it?' Shaped thus, it's a question that belongs to the unashamedly personalist literary tradition exemplified by Wordsworth and characterised by Keats as 'the egotistical sublime.'

But putting the crudest self-absorption aside for the moment (though it will surely erupt later), the question of exclusions is still worth lingering over – not in a carping spirit but just because it underlines the simple, poignant principle that any history, in order to be a history, must leave things out. Quiet interments take place. Some who once seemed substantial characters in the narrative of national culture have now, after the passage of a few quick years, been silenced; and – without disputing the decision to lay them to rest – one can still feel an elegiac twinge, even a faint hope that their voices have not disappeared forever. A couple of examples will make the point. Contributors to the Penguin *Literature of Australia* in the mid-1960s thought that Kenneth Mackenzie merited extensive discussion both as poet and as novelist. His fiction, appearing under the name Seaforth Mackenzie, was innovative in its treatment of themes seldom broached in those days, including bisexual desire, refugee experience, ethnic stereotyping; and the critical verdict on the best of his poems was that they showed 'a complete discipline and a very real achievement.' He died in 1954 but his novels continued to be reprinted, collections of his poetry were published in 1961 (edited by Douglas Stewart) and 1972 (edited by Evan Jones), and Oxford University Press published a monograph on his work. No trace of him remains in the *Cambridge History*.

Or consider the case of Leonard Mann, also extensively discussed in the 1964 Penguin volume (and not just there – I remember writing in the mid-70s a

¹ Geoffrey Dutton (ed.), *Literature of Australia* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964).

commissioned piece on Mann for an international reference book, *Contemporary Novelists*; his durability didn't seem in doubt at that stage). Mann's fiction includes strong contributions to our once dominant social realist tradition, such as the war story *Flesh in Armour* and his novels of the Depression period. The *Cambridge History* silently elides him from its pages.

Do such omissions warrant complaint? Probably not, but a moment's respectful regret seems justified. There are many such Australians whose energetic commitment to the writing vocation produced work much admired in its time, and helped to sustain a communal belief in the worthiness of literary endeavour, but who now lie, dust gathering on their spines, on sepulchral shelves in the Cemetery of Forgotten Books.² No doubt the same will soon be true for most of our own writings. Thomas Browne – not the one whose alias was Rolf Boldrewood, but the seventeenth century author of *Urne-Buriall* – remarked that 'While some have studied monuments, others have studiously declined them; and some have been so vainly boisterous that they durst not acknowledge their graves.' In what Browne calls 'the irregularities of vain glory' there is, he says, 'no patent from oblivion', and 'so much of chance, that the boldest expectants have found unhappy frustration.' Ah, let that be a lesson to us all!

The second and third questions raised by a book like the *Cambridge History* derive from the main constituent terms of its title. What does it regard as *Australian*? And what does it regard as *literature*?

Geoffrey Dutton, in his editorial introduction to the 1964 Penguin book, could invoke without a blush such creaky contraptions as 'the Australian national consciousness' and 'the Australian national character.' Pervading the present history is a much more sophisticated understanding of the problematic nature of Australianness, of its complex regional mutations, and of the intricate relationships that have always subtly connected Australian writings and readings with a world elsewhere.

Indeed I think this, above all its other attractive qualities, may be the supreme virtue of the *Cambridge History*, the thing that will make much of it hard to supersede. Whether this is fortuitous or – more likely – the result of wise editorial shaping, in collaboration with a cleverly selected group of contributors, what ripples through the pages is an intelligent conversation about the ways in which national frames of reference continue to shift ambiguously. One aspect of this topic is explicit in the titles of three fine essays placed at the beginning, middle and end of the first half of the book: 'Britain's Australia' by Ken Stewart, 'Australia's Australia' by Peter Pierce, and 'Australia's England' by Peter Morton; but different framing elements are analysed in several chapters and brought together neatly in Philip Mead's closing meditation on the nuances of 'Nation, literature, location.' That any history of this country's writing should take an international perspective is a central and cogent proposition in Robert Dixon's absorbing chapter on 'Australian fiction and the world republic of letters'. The value of resituating our national experiences within a larger pattern is also admirably demonstrated in Richard Lansdown's chapter on 'Romantic aftermaths', which argues a strong case for Wordsworth as 'the presiding

² Carlos Ruiz Zafón, *The Shadow of the Wind*, trans. Lucia Graves (Melbourne: Text, 2004).

genius of Australian Romanticism', though Lansdown seems unaware that Paul Kane is not the only critic who has partly anticipated and extended his argument.³

Among the many remarks in other essays that illuminate the basic definitional question about cultural frames of reference, there's liberating clarity in John Kinsella's observation that 'one does not have to write about Australia to be aware of it, and even the most maverick poet still groups within this consciousness. This is not [he goes on] to affirm "nation" or even "nationality" but to articulate a connectivity that cuts across lines of community, subculture and personal difference.'

The book's healthily transnational attitude reflects the reevaluation of Australian literary studies that has been developing in recent years – a welcome move beyond the parochial clubbiness that was once common in some academic circles of Australianists. In a paper published elsewhere, Robert Dixon suggests that 'the most effective way to internationalise Australian literary studies and to develop strong and resilient connections is to embed it in existing intellectual networks' that can 'take insights generated within Australian contexts into new applications, comparisons and practices.' We should, he says, 'project our research on Australian literature into international forums' and 'publish at least some of the time in journals such as *Victorian Studies*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, *Biography* and *Studies in Travel Writing*.'⁴

A statement such as this lifts my spirits. To confess that it also gives me a sense of personal vindication is to lapse into the self-indulgent manner that only a Wordsworthian could think pardonable, but perhaps it's a principled egotism. At any rate, from the time of my doctoral project long ago I've always tried to situate this country's writing in comparative and transnational contexts. Some of us working in the Australian field have never offered papers to a nationally defined periodical such as *ALS*, preferring – for the reasons Dixon gives – to publish our contributions in books and journals that link into larger networks.

Now to the third question: What does the *Cambridge History* take to be 'literature'? As you would expect, its contributors are not constrained by any narrowly belletristic assumptions. They all understand implicitly that literature is never the direct product of authorial effort. Regardless of aspirations, what writers write is always writing; literature is what their writings may get turned into by the cultural institutions of publishing, criticism, scholarly attention and the like. And so this *History* properly includes accounts of reading communities (by Richard Nile and Jason Ensor) and publication media (by David Carter), and also records the production of many kinds of writing, including journals and letters and documentaries, some of which – for various reasons in various circumstances – achieve literary recognition.

Yet the process of achieving and sustaining such status is always a chancy one, as this *History* shows, leading us back inevitably into the question of inclusions, exclusions and missed opportunities. Consider the genre of performance texts: no less than three chapters include commentary (some of it quite detailed) on the exotic comic operas of Gilbert and Sullivan, yet there's no reference anywhere to a remarkable complex home-grown multi-frame dramaturgical publication called *The*

³ There are chapters on Australia in Ian Reid, *Wordsworth and the Formation of English Literary Studies* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), and Wordsworth is also the pivotal figure in Ian Reid, 'Marking the Unmarked: an Epitaphic Preoccupation in Nineteenth-Century Australian Poetry', *Victorian Poetry* 40.1 (2002): 7-20.

⁴ Robert Dixon, 'Australian Literature – International Contexts', *Southerly* 67.1-2 (2007): 15-27.

Mudrooroo/Müller Project, which takes a German post-Marxist play about emissaries from the French Republic bringing their revolutionary ideas to the British colony of Jamaica, and adapts this piece of theatre so that it engages directly with Australian Indigenous cultural politics, framed by several other documents including a stage script in which Mudrooroo appropriates Müller's play.⁵

A different kind of example: a whole chapter here is devoted to 'Early writings by Indigenous Australians', which stretches problematically the usual sense of 'writing' to include oral testimony transcribed and transformed by white editors, and exhibits nothing that most readers would recognise as approaching 'literature.' On the other hand many prominent Australian writers who have practised their craft with masterly skill and earned high esteem within the protocols of a thoroughly literary culture are invisible despite the book's claim to be 'comprehensive'. You'll find, for instance, no discussion here of the poems of Andrew Taylor or Chris Wallace-Crabbe or Fay Zwicky or Tom Shapcott or Bruce Beaver, or of the novels of Peter Goldsworthy or Brenda Walker or Barry Hill, or of George Seddon's eloquent essays or Kate Llewellyn's quirky memoirs. Some of these do score a passing mention as mere names, usually in long 'space does not permit' lists, but one gets no exact sense of what their distinctive, substantial and intensely literary contributions have been. It would be churlish to carp about this; the *Cambridge History* could hardly have gone to more pages or an even smaller font size. Individual exclusions are the sadly inevitable cost of any narrative shaping.

Nevertheless, generic gaps do deserve some comment, and it's noteworthy that while various textual forms are liberally included in several of the chapters, hybrids often miss out. For example David McCooey has a fine chapter on autobiography but it tends to ignore genre-crossing texts such as Bruce Beaver's *As it Was* – an innovative memoir that combines poetry, prose and photographs. And while there are two chapters on the short story (by Bruce Bennett and Stephen Torre), which are both well written, wide-ranging, full of astute observations, neither considers the short story's linkages with neighbouring forms – so there's no consideration of the novella, though its importance is featured in a just-published anthology, *The Australian Long Story*; nor of the relationship between Australian short fiction and non-fictional autobiographical sketches, a topic that has elsewhere received critical attention in a transnational context.⁶

'Literature', then? What comes to be regarded as literary is often, I suppose, the kind of text whose mediation shows its ingenious dependence on other texts. We all know the story of the hoax publication 65 years ago of Mr Malley's *The Darkening Ecliptic*, one of the few slim volumes of verse that seems likely to figure in every history of Australian literature for a long while to come, not least because – being the work of a dead poet who never lived – it embodies so scandalously the principle that all writing is pastiche, fabricated out of the materials of other writing. To recognise

⁵ Gerhard Fischer (ed.), *The Mudrooroo/Müller Project: A Theatrical Casebook* (Kensington: NSW University Press, 1993). For a discussion of the cultural mediations embodied in this set of texts, see Gale MacLachlan and Ian Reid, *Framing and Interpretation* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1994) 109-112.

⁶ Mandy Sayer (ed.), *The Australian Long Story* (Camberwell: Hamish Hamilton, 2009); Ian Reid, 'Reframing *The Child in the House*: Short Stories and Neighbouring Forms', in N.H. Kaylor (ed.) *Creative and Critical Approaches to the Short Story* (Lewiston (NY): Edwin Mellen Press, 1997) 315-328.

this is to know, consolingly, that no voice is wholly lost: each shout or whisper can be gathered up, at least by implication, in later ventriloquistic cadences. That intimation of immortality may make the eclipse of reputations seem less dark. There's an Ern Malley in every writer, and behind every Ern stands a whole row of other urns from other times and places – including Sir Thomas Browne's sombre funerary receptacle, John Donne's well-wrought urn, and John Keats's foster-child of silence and slow time.

A livelier image seems appropriate to characterise the *Cambridge History* itself. Full of vitality, it makes bold flights beyond old boundaries into regions once thought foreign. Any large multi-author survey may have the lineaments of a peculiar hybrid, as the Dutton-edited Penguin publication hinted in cross-dressing as 'a Pelican Original' – a bird of a different feather. But this Cambridge creature makes even its familiar features look splendidly strange. Soaring and settling where previous histories have seldom spread or folded their wings, it's both national and transnational, both homely and *unheimlich*, almost incarnating that chimerical Malley fowl, 'the black swan of trespass on alien waters.'

Ian Reid