SNOW ON THE SALTBUSH

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(Weekend Australian)

Geoffrey Dutton

Snow on the Saltbush

The Australian Literary Experience

GEOFFREY DUTTON

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Geoffrey Dutton was born in 1922 at Anlaby, the oldest stud sheep station in South Australia. He was educated at Geelong Grammar, Adelaide University and Magdalen College, Oxford, where he read English under C. S. Lewis. War service as a pilot with the RAAF gave him a different kind of education, no less valuable.

Senior Lecturer in English at Adelaide University from 1953 to 1962, he has subsequently been Visiting Fellow at the University of Leeds and Professor at Kansas University. Dutton's appointment as founding editor of Penguin Australia in 1962 took him into a new area of Australian literature. He became co-founder of Sun Books, *Australian Letters* and the *Australian Book Review*, and has been editor of the *Bulletin* Literary Supplement since its establishment in 1980.

An accomplished writer with forty books to his credit – poetry, biography, art and literary criticism, fiction and children's writing – Geoffrey Dutton is unusually well qualified to assess and explain the Australian literary experience.

It is not in the nature of things that men brimful of Englandism can ever do us any real national good

Charles Harpur

Books are not spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures but are the work of suffering human beings and are attached to grossly material things like health and money and the houses we live in

Virginia Woolf

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Introduction

The history of literature in Australia is more than just the history of Australian literature. The distinction is often not appreciated by those with a professional interest in the subject, who are also inclined to discuss literature only in terms of fiction, poetry and drama.

The writer is the originator of all literature, but although there have been writers who have had no thought of publication, nearly all literature depends on an environment in which it can grow, receiving both invisible and material sustenance. This environment consists of readers and listeners, of publishers and booksellers, of newspapers, magazines and journals, of teachers and critics, of patrons, of writers' groups and professional bodies, of national feeling. In some ways this last is, in a young ex-colonial country, the most important, and certainly the hardest to define and the easiest to misinterpret. We need to establish 'a sense of spiritual geography', a phrase once used by a reviewer of Randolph Stow's novel *To the Islands.*

A brash nationalism or the commercial brand of patriotism is as harmful to literature as the cultural cringe. This useful phrase of A. A. Phillips has often been misinterpreted. He characterized the cultural cringe as the Cringe Direct or the Cringe Inverted. 'The opposite of the Cringe', he said, 'is not the Strut, but a relaxed erectness of carriage.' Just as harmful as the cultural cringe is the setting up of barriers between what is Australian and what is imported. Because the white invasion of Australia disturbed the natural ecology of the country, a physical task has been to preserve areas of wildness (wilderness never seems the right word) and to keep a balance in the developed areas between the natural environment and the imported animals and plants on which Australians live. Not even the Aborigines want to go back to a state of wildness; and it is absurd for white Australians to attempt to establish an

Australian identity which is not constantly modified and enriched by all that is best from abroad, as well as being the subject of satire and humour at home. It is of course essential to defend the Australian ecology, physical or aesthetic, from the worst from abroad. There are rabbits and prickly pears of the mind. It is also essential for Australians to assess the outside world. Years ago Frank Dalby Davison wrote to me about one of my travel books: 'Australia is our home, but the world is our province, and we need it interpreted through Australian eyes.'

It would be impossible to assess all the complexities of this literary ecology or environment in one book. I have tried here to explore certain aspects of it, to make as it were drillings and reports rather than dig up the whole country. Theodore Zeldin has done something similar in his superb history of ideas, *France, 1848–1945.* In its four volumes he does not make one historical progression, but by pursuing certain themes gives samples that taken together allow profound insights into the life of France at that time.

My approach is, however, much more personal than Zeldin's. He is a Fellow of an Oxford college, writing about France from outside, and his period of study ends nearly forty years ago. I am writing, often close to the present day, as an author, editor and publisher, as a former lecturer in various universities, and as one who has spent many a weary hour sitting on the Commonwealth Literary Fund Advisory Board and the Literature Board of the Australia Council. I was also involved for many years with Writers' Week in the Adelaide Festival of Arts.

The 1950s and 1960s saw a renaissance of Australian literature and publishing, and of attitudes to literature in Australia, and the history of the literary environment of that period is particularly important. At that time I was a co-founder (with Max Harris and Bryn Davies) of the literary quarterly *Australian Letters*, and (with Max Harris) of the monthly *Australian Book Review*, the first journal to attempt to review or at least notice all Australian non-technical books. Later Rosemary Wighton was a co-editor of both publications. Australia has always been quite extraordinary, in comparison with other countries, in the involvement of women in literature, as writers and, more recently, editors and publishers. Any study of the literary environment in Australia raises questions about the Australian male chauvinist cliché. Ockers don't buy books, and the sale of Australian books, *when they were available*, has always been remarkable, in terms of population, by world standards. I italicize

those words because English publishers of Australian books were not always very interested in Australian readers. They published for the library market of the United Kingdom, and in Australia a traveller often represented up to a dozen English publishers. One such traveller told me that when he began in the job, in the 1930s, he was told by his boss always to put the Australian books at the bottom of the bag. Max Harris tells me that exactly the same thing was still happening in the early 1950s, when my first four books were published by Chapman & Hall in London.

The success of Australian films in recent years could not have come about without Australian audiences. Yet it is strange that critics often discuss books as if they existed independent of readers. Although very few Australian writers can live year after year, even in the utmost modesty, on the sales of their books in Australia alone, the quality and diversity of Australian literature in the last twenty years are vitally connected to the awakened need of Australians to read books about their own country as well as books from overseas. As editor of the *Bulletin* Literary Supplement I have found in travelling to the remotest regions of Australia that this need amounts almost to a hunger.

I am convinced that literary history should not be written solely in terms of writers, let alone restricting them to writers of fiction, poetry and drama. Individuals are of prime importance in the production and sale of books and magazines, the tempering of the intellectual climate, the fostering of people's confidence in their own literature. Some of these people, like Sir Allen Lane of Penguin Books, were not Australian; some, like the writer and editor Douglas Stewart or the publisher Andrew Fabinyi, were migrants. Most, of course, *were* Australian, and a random sample of their names adds up to the most profound influence on the Australian literary environment: George Robertson, J. F. Archibald, A. G. Stephens, Vance and Nettie Palmer, H. M. and Dorothy Green, Guy Moore, Frank Cheshire, Cedric Pearce, Harry Muir, the Preece family, Margareta Webber, Clem Christesen, Rex Ingamells, James McAuley, Max Harris, Stephen Murray-Smith, G. A. Wilkes, Rosemary Wighton, Grace Perry, Henrietta Drake-Brockman, Mary Durack, Beatrice Davis, John Reed, George Ferguson, Lloyd O'Neil, Brian Stonier, Tom Fitzgerald, Harry Kippax, Donald Horne, Richard Walsh, Patricia Rolfe, Stuart Sayers, B. R. Elliott, A. A. Phillips, Katharine Brisbane. The list is endless. Again and again I have found that it is

the impact of a personality, and the ability to sustain a vision, that stimulates writers and readers and audiences. This is obvious with a satirist like Barry Humphries, but it is also true of the influence of James McAuley on his school and university magazines, of Max Harris and Donald Horne on their university magazines.

The study of Australian literature in schools and universities has enormously increased the sale of certain books, and added to the coffers of those who own machines for photocopying. Unfortunately there is a vicious circle in the academic study of literature. The only books that can be set for study are those in print, and the authors who stay in print are those whose books are set. Often there is a great disparity between those writers who are read by the general public and those who are 'studied'.

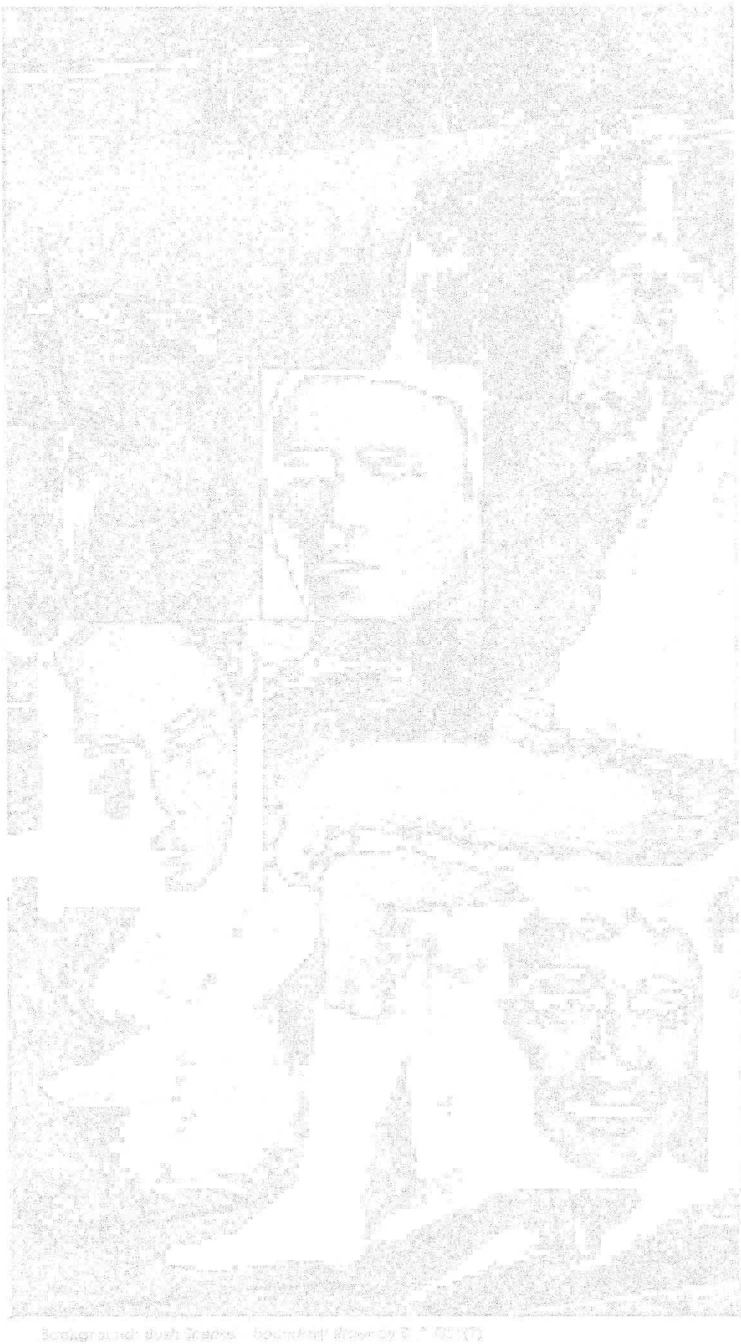
That 'sense of spiritual geography' is not attained by the specialist study of Australian literature but by the realization that Australian literature belongs to world literature, by the acceptance of the fact that literature in Australia consists of Gibbon *and* Manning Clark, of Flaubert *and* Patrick White, of Tennessee Williams *and* David Williamson, of Edmund Wilson *and* Donald Horne, of Bella Akhmadulina *and* Judith Wright.

Whether one writer is better than another is not the point; the point is the acceptance of Australia and Australian literature as part of world literature, which must in turn go with an acceptance of Australia by Australians. Sometimes this book is about the huge cloud of the Old World that hung over Australia, often releasing snow onto the saltbush; sometimes it is about those valiant or foolish individuals who tried to make Australians look at themselves in their own light. There is also mention of the cloudfall from the new world, which is the USA and communism. Although I have commented on individual writers for the stage, I have not attempted any survey of the environment of Australian drama or film. These are separate worlds, which require separate studies.

Although there are still battles to be won, the preservation and appreciation of the Australian physical and architectural environment have never been as enthusiastic as now. The same guarded optimism is justified in relation to the literary environment. It is essential for the health of that environment that respect be paid, not just to a select band of approved writers, but to the widest spectrum of those who could be called, with that slight, ironic smile without which Australians are not quite happy, literary environmentalists.

Contents

Part One
The Nature of the Theme



Background: Bush Scene – Boundary Rider by [illegible]

Mary Gilmore John Shaw Neilson Peter Mathers

Chapter 1
The Credibility of Australian Literature

I want to approach this book as a writer and editor and publisher, but with a wary eye on the academy, having spent a dozen years or so inside the electrified fence of its groves.

In the last thirty years there has been, for reasons of both economic security and a false notion of prestige, a swing of writers and critics towards the universities and other tertiary institutions. This has produced some good writing, but it has also been dangerous because it has tended to institutionalize the gap between writers and the public, and also to cause young people to think that literature is something merely to be studied. In many ways the Grub Street of the eighteenth century was a healthier background for literature than its study in institutions. For a start, it was much easier for a writer of spirit to turn and rend his critics. They had to come out in the open in print, and not skulk in seminars. Only a few years ago I remember a well-known academic saying to me with relish: 'I've got a splendid lot of honours students at the moment. We had a double seminar yesterday and by the end they'd fairly demolished Judith Wright.' Again, when I was lecturing at Adelaide University, one of my best students came to me almost in tears and said, 'I thought you told us Kenneth Slessor was a good poet. We've just had a lecture from Mr X and he said Slessor isn't even a third-rate poet'.

Naturally it is a good thing if the reading public is well educated, but this is not imperative, as we have come to think nowadays. The first essential to literature is the wish in people to read, or not even to read, to hear. Sometimes it doesn't really matter if people don't understand all that they're reading or hearing.

Probably the world's greatest audience for writers is in the Soviet Union. This has long been so, for the people have a deep veneration for literature and a confidence in writers as people who

will tell them the truth. There is a wonderful story told by the English writer Maurice Baring, who lived in Russia before the Revolution. He was travelling in a remote region and had to spend the night in a small village. Some of the villagers came to him and said that they had heard he was an English writer, and that one of the peasants would like to recite to him. Baring asked them to show the man in, and waited to hear some lines of Pushkin or Lermontov. Instead, the old peasant lifted his beard and began:

> Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit
> Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal taste . . .

He had been coachman to an Englishman in Russia who had a passion for Milton. He himself could speak very little English.

No wonder literature flourishes in such an atmosphere of trust. Conversely, there is no reason why audiences should not respond to what is easy to understand. Daniel Defoe was a vulgar and not very upright man, but *Robinson Crusoe*'s eternal qualities are not diminished by the simplicity of the style and the undistinguished character of the hero.

It is only quality that survives, but that does not mean that the only books that should be published are those that will survive. The academic establishment of a canon of quality, which seems so innocuous, even desirable, is in fact one of the worst hazards for the free growth of any literature. Literature should be as non-exclusive as true religion, and all should be welcome, the sinners who read *The Thorn Birds* and the saints who read Patrick White.

This is understood by most writers and, especially, most publishers, who cannot afford to ignore or condemn the marketplace. The danger of the academic life, whether for poet or critic, is that it is too comfortable. Not only are there the salary, paid holidays and superannuation, and even, perhaps, study leave, but the academic mixes constantly with people of his own kind who have all read the Henry James *Notebooks*. Businessmen or farmers or welders may all look much the same, but one may be an avid reader and another never open a book.

In Australia there is also a dangerous connection between the academies and the Literature Board of the Australia Council, in the cushioning of literature from the problems of reaching the general reader. Having served for many years on the Literature Board and the old Commonwealth Literary Fund, as in academies,