

Australian Literature 1950-1962

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Preface

This account of Australian writing over the last dozen years is intended to bring up to date the account given in H. M. Green's *Australian Literature 1900-1950*. His death in 1962, shortly after the publication of his monumental *A History of Australian Literature*, makes it necessary for another hand to undertake what he would have been by far the best person to do. Because I lack anything like H. M. Green's encyclopaedic knowledge of all fields of Australian writing I have not attempted to follow his plan and have confined myself mainly to literature proper, literary criticism and scholarship.

A supplement like this cannot simply begin where the main work left off and cannot form a seamless garment with it. Some patching is necessary. Writers included in the earlier work have continued to produce new books and my opinions on them are sometimes at variance with those expressed in the original work. Some writers omitted, or mentioned only briefly, must be given the place they now seem to deserve, notably the novelist Martin Boyd. Some work belonging to the earlier period, such as the prose of Christopher Brennan, has only just come to publication. Some reputations have declined and some have grown as criticism has taken a new turn in recent years. But I have tried to patch as little as possible and have avoided trespassing on the field covered by my predecessor as much as I could.

A. D. H.

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The Background

The growth of literature in Australia has been a continuous one with few marked or sudden changes of direction or character. Yet anyone reviewing the state of letters in the country today must be aware of considerable differences from its condition twenty or thirty years ago. Though the changes that account for these differences have been going on since the 1920s and were already evident during the second World War, they were for the most part changes in Australian society and have only shown themselves in literature since 1950. H. M. Green, in his survey of Australian writing over the first half of this century, described this new look as one of greater sophistication, more concern with personality and less with presenting general national character, more concern with individual circumstances and less with typical aspects, and above all a higher standard of craftsmanship. It could also be described as a less provincial attitude, a greater awareness of the unity of the literary tradition of the English-speaking world and a greater assurance and competence in the handling of themes and subjects. Australian writers have not become less Australian, nor less conscious of the fact that they write as Australians, but they are less apt to consider this fact either a disability or a claim to merit.

This growing maturity of outlook and treatment is, of course, partly one of autonomous development, but it can also be related to, if not entirely explained as, a reflection of changes in the conditions within which Australian writers work. Perhaps the first and most important of these is that Australians are better educated than they were twenty or thirty years ago. Most children now have a secondary school education, and this was not so before the last war. In 1939 there were six universities in the country, now there are ten and there are plans for at least five more in the next ten years. The number of students in the same period has risen from under fifteen thousand to

nearly fifty thousand. The number of educated readers has risen and so has the number of writers who have had a university education. For the first time in its history Australian society has a literate 'class' to whom writers can address themselves.

This change has been accompanied by a breaking down of that isolation of Australian society from the rest of the world which was so characteristic of its first hundred and thirty years. Modern communications have helped; the last war forced it on. In thirty years a politically dependent country largely living on the sale of its primary products has become a highly industrialized, politically autonomous nation, living in a precarious world and forced to awareness of other civilizations as a condition of its survival. The writers of today are no less concerned with their own country than those of a generation ago, but their outlook is less insular and much less parochial.

As a result, the relations of Australian writers with their reading public have changed considerably. During the war there was a boom in publishing in Australia. After the war a number of English publishing firms established branches in Australia. Not only are more books now published in Australia but more Australian writers are being published abroad, both in England and America, and overseas publishers are actively looking for talent and for manuscripts in Australia, where a generation ago writers were faced with a choice of seeking a limited public in Australia or trying to place their work abroad with very precarious chances of success.

Criticism has come into line with these changes in such a way as to make Australian writers feel that their work is being taken more seriously than was the case before 1939. At that time no university studied Australian writing as such. Now most universities have courses in the subject and the scholarly and critical assessment of our literature is being systematically developed, not only in this country but in the United States, Canada and Great Britain. A sign of this is the recent publication of a special number of the *Texas Quarterly* devoted to Australian writing; the special number of *The Times Literary Supplement* devoted to Australia, and with a considerable

section on Australian literature; the inclusion of a considerable number of book-length studies of Australian writers in Twayne's World Authors Series; the Oxford University Press's recent volume, *Australian Literary Criticism*, edited by Grahame Johnston, and the forthcoming Penguin volume written by Australian critics, *A Guide to Australian Literature*, edited by Geoffrey Dutton. All this would have seemed a pipe dream twenty-five years ago; there was no established literary journal in which serious assessment of Australian critics could find adequate space, and the history of such journals was one of ephemeral success and rapid failure. Most reviewing was done by journalists for their daily papers and on the whole was scrappy and perfunctory. Today there is a number of well established literary journals of which the most important are *Southerly*, *Meanjin Quarterly*, *Quadrant*, *Australian Letters*, *Overland*, and *Westerly*, while the daily and weekly papers give considerable space to reviews of Australian books and often seek out professional critics to write them. The first issue of an academic journal devoted to Australian literature, *Australian Literary Studies*, was published in August 1963.

When one turns from the setting to the writers themselves, the last twelve years can show some equally interesting developments in the fields of poetry, fiction, drama and criticism, both in respect of those writers whose reputation was already established before the mid-century and of those who have emerged since.

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Poetry

The previous decade or so was marked by the emergence of several lively and vocal 'schools' of poetry: the Jindyworobak movement, the *avant-garde* group associated with the magazine *Angry Penguins*, and a large group of leftist poets united by political rather than by literary convictions. None of these as a group survived and no new movements of any importance have arisen to take their place. Present-day Australian poets

write as individuals and express an individual vision and outlook. What they have in common is a return to traditional forms and techniques of verse and a retreat from experimental methods, free verse, surrealist logomania, fragmentary imagism, dislocated syntax and symbolist allusiveness. They use traditional metres and rhymes, aim at lucid and coherent exposition of themes, and at poems which are intellectually and emotionally controlled and organized. The increasing number of literary magazines and the support given to the publication of poetry by the Commonwealth Literary Fund have led to a steady increase in the amount as well as the quality of poetry published. This is indicated by the fact that only six volumes of serious verse appeared in 1950 as against some twenty volumes in 1961. Perhaps the most interesting thing about Australian poetry today, as compared with the past, is that the old self-consciousness about being Australian in subject and idiom has almost completely disappeared. The poets are no less interested in the scene in which they live, but they appear to take it for granted. The country is something they start from and not something they feel they have to aim towards.

Of the older poets some, like Kenneth Slessor, have produced nothing new. However, his reputation, solidly founded on his *One Hundred Poems* (1944), has continued to grow as several reprintings testify. Others, like Robert FitzGerald, have broken new ground. In *Between Two Tides* (1952) and *This Night's Orbit* (1953) he moves away from the lyric and contemplative vein of his earlier work towards the poetic presentation of man in history and the study of character revealed by action. The first is a long narrative dealing with a tale of massacre, warfare and intrigue, mainly in the Tongan Islands. But its emphasis is not on events so much as on the philosophy of character in relation to society. In spite of its rather loose and rambling verse designed to match the effects of prose narrative, it is an unusual and impressive poem. After some years of silence FitzGerald has published two more books, *The Wind at Your Door* (1959), a single poem which reappears in *Southmost Twelve* (1962), a volume in which he returns to the philosophic

mode which first won him fame with 'Essay on Memory' and 'The Hidden Bole'. As time passes, his work continues to grow in stature as something at once simple, profound and serene, and humanly convincing. This nobleness of nature and steadily growing stature is also a characteristic of Judith Wright's poetry. *The Gateway* (1953) and *The Two Fires* (1955) contain poems very unequal in quality, but the best of them continue and deepen that sense of sybilline utterance and metaphysical vision which won immediate recognition for her first two volumes. Her last volume, *Birds* (1962), has been perhaps misunderstood. Under cover of a series of charming, even whimsical, descriptions of Australian birds the metaphysical vision grows and deepens. The key to it is the last poem. This concentration of a poem upon a single bird or flower or animal in the manner of a naturalist's study is, in fact, extremely common among this generation of Australian poets. Douglas Stewart, James McAuley, and Rosemary Dobson are the most distinguished practitioners. In the forties Douglas Stewart was more renowned for his verse dramas than for poetry, in which his touch was uncertain as it was still in *The Birdsville Track* (1955). However, *Sun Orchids* (1952) already showed the emergence of a more craftsmanlike verse and his latest volume, *Rutherford* (1962), besides some exquisite poems in the naturalist genre, illustrates what is perhaps the other sort of poem most characteristic of these poets—something between a dramatic monologue and a description of a character. The poet speaks about his character and yet the character seems to be speaking through the poet. An early and successful poem of this kind was Slessor's 'Heine in Paris'; Stewart's 'Rutherford', Fitz-Gerald's 'The Third Day' are other successful examples. It has been justly pointed out that, as the interest lies mainly in selection of historical persons, such poems have Browning's dramatic monologues as their common ancestor.

Among the poets already commanding attention before 1950, Rosemary Dobson deserves a special mention. *Child with a Cockatoo* (1955) shows the maturity of that exquisite and sensitive craftsmanship which distinguished her earlier volumes. A. D. Hope should also be placed in this older group, though

his poetry did not appear in book form till *The Wandering Islands* (1955) and *Poems* (1960). Comment on his own poems by the writer of this pamphlet would be out of place, but his apparent indifference to Australian themes perhaps illustrates by contrast how deeply involved in their surroundings are most other Australian poets of the day.

When one comes to the poets whose reputations have mainly been established in the last decade, there is little distinctively new in the body of work produced and yet one gets an impression of a growing sense of style, a greater skill in handling poetic forms and a more professional attitude to the craft than the country has known before. These are all remarks that can be made about Australian writing in general, but in addition the work of the younger poets has an intellectual quality, a serious preoccupation with ideas which has hitherto been lacking in our poetry and which is still largely lacking in prose fiction and drama. Among the older generation of poets still writing, the ideas tended to be imported from abroad. The influence of T. S. Eliot is very perceptible. Something that has never happened before is the appearance of Australian poets who themselves give an intellectual lead to their younger contemporaries. Among these, the most important and influential in recent years has been James McAuley, whose *Under Aldebaran* (1946) was followed by *A Vision of Ceremony* (1956). McAuley is a poet who writes, like Brennan, with the whole European tradition in his bones and, unlike Brennan, in verse of exquisite simplicity, purity and authority. Though he has published little, his work has had a deep and growing influence on his contemporaries, but his intellectual leadership has been exercised even more through the magazine *Quadrant*, of which he has been editor since 1956, and his critical writings, which cut like a surgeon's knife into the literary diseases of the time. Vincent Buckley, whose first volume, *The World's Flesh* (1954), was followed by *Masters in Israel* (1961), evinces more varied talents and, as an intellectual force, is almost as important. His poetry is as instinct with violence and energy as McAuley's is lucid and serene, and as a critic he is almost as influential. Loosely associated with these two is a number of poets, most

of whom, like them, hold or have held university posts and whose work seems to stem more directly from the general literary tradition of Europe than from a native Australian line; Rilke, Hölderlin, Mörike, Mallarmé, Valéry, Baudelaire and Leconte de Lisle, Hopkins, Yeats, Dylan Thomas and W. H. Auden have had more influence than any Australian predecessors. They write as poets of the English-speaking world rather than as consciously Australian poets even when they write, as they often do, about Australia. Francis Webb's *A Drum for Ben Boyd* (1948) was followed by *Leichhardt in Theatre* (1952) and *Birthday* (1953), three volumes whose titles suggest poetry drawn from the contemplation of historical personality. This is partly true although in these, as in his latest volume, *Socrates and Other Poems* (1961), he shows more concern with exploring an inner, metaphysical vision. Geoffrey Dutton, whose first book was published as long ago as 1944, has come slowly to maturity. *Antipodes in Shoes* (1958) was sketchy, patchy and diffuse, but *Flowers and Fury* (1962) begins to show mastery of a real talent. One of the most interesting poets to emerge in this decade is Gwen Harwood, who has not yet published a volume of verse. She ranges from poems of great concentration and purity of feeling to a series of sardonic poems which together make up a comic apocalypse of characters centring in the fabulous Professor Eisenbart. An incorrigible leg-puller, she writes under a number of different names.

Several other poets have established themselves in the main since 1950, though they had published before. John Thompson, *Thirty Poems* (1954), writes a dramatic, loose-textured verse which, several critics have suggested, seems to reflect his occupation as a producer for radio. At any rate his poetry and that of Nancy Keesing, *Imminent Summer* (1951) and *Three Men and Sydney* (1955), often read better aloud, and the same is true, in their different ways, of the work of Elizabeth Riddell, *Forbears* (1961), and of Ray Mathew, *South of the Equator* (1961). It is not that any of them write declamatory verse, but their syntax has a colloquial, free-moving quality within the verse structure which suggests what Robert Graves calls 'ear-poems', rather than poems for the eye. City life, and specifically

the life of Sydney, is the atmosphere within which the poetry works, at any rate with the first three.

Younger poets who have already produced work of great promise and individuality are Christopher Wallace-Crabbe, *The Music of Division* (1959), and Evan Jones, *Inside the Whale* (1960). Both appear to be developing and maturing their very different styles. The same is true of John Manifold, *Nightmares and Sunhorses* (1961), and Alexander Craig, *Far-Back Country* (1954), though they display neither the command nor the vision of the first two.

All the poets mentioned so far have been of the kind that H. M. Green, surveying the literary scene in the forties, would have felt constrained to classify as 'intellectual poets'. There were few enough of them at the time for this to seem an apt enough description, and to single them out from the general pattern of Australian verse. Now the pattern is reversed and no one would think of distinguishing these poets as intellectual, for their interests, their subjects and their treatments seem no more than what one would normally expect of competent poets. They simply employ the whole resources of a poetry in which to feel deeply is to respond to something about which one has thought deeply. There has been a real renaissance of poetry in Australia in recent years, as more than one outside observer has remarked, yet it would be true enough to say that this is a renaissance which has made the most of the territory already occupied by modern poets. It has on the whole failed to break new ground, to find new forms for poetry or to revive the great forms which have been in abeyance since the mid-nineteenth century. The level of performance is high, the individuality of each poet well marked, but there is a sort of family resemblance in so much poetry devoted to short lyrics, interior monologues, descriptions and impressions of places and persons, almost as though they were written to appear in the same anthologies—as indeed they seem to do. There is in fact more individuality in those poets who follow the more traditional line of writing about the local scene and countryside, of whom David Campbell is probably the outstanding example. His three volumes, *Speak with the Sun* (1949), *The Miracle of Mullion Hill* (1956), and

Poems (1962), have ease, a genuine sense of country life, an unaffected meditative strain and a delightful sense of fun. Other poets who should be mentioned and who fit in more or less with this notion of a spontaneous and largely traditional response to the countryside, the bush or the inland, are Roland Robinson, *Deep Well* (1962), David Rowbottom, *Inland* (1958), Ian Mudie, *The Blue Crane* (1959), and perhaps Nancy Cato, *The Darkened Window* (1950) and *The Dancing Bough* (1957).

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The Novel

The enormous number of novels published in Australia and overseas by Australian writers in the last twelve years is more easily dealt with, since most have been reasonably competent but undistinguished and, unlike the work of the poets in the same period, they mostly fall into well marked groups. The traditional Australian novel dealing with life on the land and pioneering in the bush has been given a rest at last, with one or two notable exceptions. There was naturally a crop of war novels dealing mainly with the war and its aftermath in New Guinea and South-East Asia, of which Tom Hungerford's *The Ridge and the River* (1952) and Sowers of the Wind (1954), Jon Cleary's *The Climate of Courage* (1954), Eric Lambert's *Forty Thousand Thieves* (1952), Seaforth Mackenzie's *Dead Men Rising* (1951), and David Forrest's *The Last Blue Sea* (1959), are perhaps the best. The war provided dramatic situations peculiarly suited to bring out the clash and force of personalities not as easily reproduced in ordinary life, and none of these novelists has been quite so successful in their later work. G. M. Glaskin's *The Beach of Passionate Love* (1961), set in Malaya after the war, is a competent novel but chiefly significant perhaps as a portent of the way the Australian novel is beginning to look beyond the boundaries of its own country. Michael Keon's *The Durian Tree* (1960) has much the same sort of setting. The proletarian novel, under the suspect title of Social Realism, continued into the fifties when the decline of the

Communist movement gave it a rather sentimental and old-fashioned air, and the Left has produced no outstanding works, though Frank Hardy's *Power Without Glory* (1950) had a *succès de scandale*. The third volume of Katharine Susannah Prichard's goldfields trilogy, *Winged Seeds* (1950), has documentary rather than literary interest. Dymphna Cusack's *Southern Steel* (1953) and Mena Calthorpe's *The Dyehouse* (1961), dealing with aspects of the class struggle in industry, rise slightly above the usual dreary level of novels devoted to causes and movements. Dymphna Cusack's very real gift for social satire is best seen in *Come in Spinner* (1951), written with Florence James and dealing with war-time Australia. However, two novelists of ability whose sympathies lie in this direction should be mentioned, since they illustrate the influence of European immigration. Judah Waten's *Alien Son* (1952) and *The Unbending* (1954), one a series of sketches and the other a novel, deal with the experiences of Russian Jewish immigrant families in Australia with warmth and humanity rather offset by the aridness of the treatment of the political theme. Waten has also published *Shares in Murder* (1957) and *Time of Conflict* (1961). David Martin, central European by birth, published several novels before coming to Australia. *The Young Wife* (1962) deals with the Greek and Italian communities in Melbourne. The tradition of the European, especially the Russian, novel lies behind both these writers.

Australian novelists in the last few years have begun to pay more attention to the city than the country, and to contemporary life rather than the pioneering past. Seaforth Mackenzie's *The Refuge* (1954) is set in Sydney. Xavier Herbert after some years of silence produced *Soldiers' Women* (1961), dealing with the same field as *Come in Spinner*, but where the latter was rather flat in style the former is badly over-written. Ruth Park's able and quite unpretentious novels occasionally deal with life in the slums; *Harp in the South* (1948) and *Poor Man's Orange* (1949) led on to what is perhaps her best book, *A Power of Roses* (1953). John Morrison's *Port of Call* (1950) is set on the waterfront. Allied to this interest in city

life is that in delinquents, 'misfits', 'beats', and young criminals, which has been caught from prevailing fashions abroad. John Cleary's *You Can't See Round Corners* (1948) and Crieda Rohan's *The Delinquents* (1962) are reasonably successful examples. Christopher Koch's *The Boys in the Island* (1958) is the only one that shows real literary ability.

The traditional novel of country life and the outback has shown a predilection for themes connected with the aborigines; Tom Ronan's *Vision Splendid* (1954) touches on it, F. B. Vickers' *The Mirage* (1955) has a half-caste as its central character, Mary Durack's *Keep Him My Country* (1955), Donald Stuart's *Yandy* (1959), Nene Gare's *The Fringe Dwellers* (1961) and Randolph Stow's *To the Islands* (1958) bear witness to this interest. One cannot help wondering whether the incurable class-consciousness of so much Australian fiction is not here seeking a new group of the under-privileged in a society whose proletariat has disappeared into the middle class. At any rate, none of these novels can match the classic in this field, Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo* (1929).

It is, of course, unfair to class *To the Islands* with these works, for it is primarily the story of an individual white man in search of his death, and the same theme could conceivably have had another setting than that of an aboriginal mission. Stow is perhaps the most gifted of the younger novelists and his gifts have hitherto been rare in Australian fiction: lucid and economical narrative, power to create outstanding character, and poetic insight into the springs of action that reveal character. His earlier novels are *A Haunted Land* (1956) and *The Bystander* (1957). Two new novelists who have shown more than usual ability are G. R. Turner and Thea Astley. *The Cupboard Under the Stairs* (1962) by the first, and *A Descant for Gossips* (1960) by the second, show considerable talent but neither has so far succeeded in creating characters that matter enough to give their stories any real significance. A somewhat neglected writer, Helen Heney, has shown this power in at least two of her novels. *Dark Moon* (1953) and *This Quiet Dust* (1956) deserve more notice than they have so far received.

Two novelists stand out above the others as men of interna-

tional reputation, Martin Boyd and Patrick White. Boyd was mentioned under a pseudonym, Martin Mills, in H. M. Green's earlier survey. He had published two novels before 1928 when *The Montforts* drew attention to him as a novelist of real distinction and power. By 1950 he had published eleven novels, one of which, *Lucinda Brayford* (1946), was perhaps the best novel since Henry Handel Richardson's *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*. It is a brilliant picture of two worlds and of people who live in two worlds, England and Australia. It is unashamedly and elegantly 'upper class', perhaps a reason why it has not seemed to fit into the working-class and lower middle-class atmosphere of the great run of Australian fiction. Like many of Boyd's novels it is infused with the problem of two civilizations and the effect on the characters who belong to both. But too much has been made of this. Boyd's central theme is based, as all great fiction is, on the inner life of significant individuals. He has the power to create them and the mastery to present them in the 'deep debate betwixt damnation and impassioned clay'. Since 1950 he has published *The Cardboard Crown* (1952), *A Difficult Young Man* (1954) and *Outbreak of Love* (1957), and his reputation has steadily grown. Technically conservative and even old-fashioned, his methods are essentially those of Flaubert and Stendhal, his outlook on the practice of fiction has something in common with Henry James, with whom he has been compared on other grounds. But if he lacks the penetration of James and the innocence of the heart which is the instrument of that penetration, he is superior to James in style, commanding resources of wit, irony, lucid comment and an educated sense of language rare in Australian fiction.

Patrick White's reputation outshines that of Boyd at present, though it is doubtful whether it will continue to do so. White is unquestionably the best known and most discussed Australian novelist of the day and his work has been as successful abroad as in this country. He is a novelist of very varied gifts. His talent for creating unusual and interesting characters is rare in Australian fiction, and he has an impressive metaphysical conception of man, though his concept of society