

# *The Emplotment of Australian Literary Culture: "The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature"*

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THE OXFORD COMPANION TO AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE, compiled by three academics at the Royal Military College, Duntroon, A.C.T., will be of great interest to Canadians who wish to have an up-to-date, well-researched account of the literary culture, past and present, of Canada's sibling nation.<sup>1</sup> The volume is thorough in scholarship, wide ranging, immensely informative. It is the first *Companion* to appear in Australia.

Those familiar with William Toye's revised *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* (1983) will observe differences in procedure and in material included. Entries in the Australian *Companion* are the joint work of the three compilers and are consequently unsigned, only occasional pieces by contributing scholars bearing signatures. The Preface notes some thirty academics and scholars who have served as advisers to the project. Less strictly "literary" than the Canadian *Companion*, the Australian *Companion* follows more closely the presentation of Margaret Drabble's *Oxford Companion to English Literature* (1985), providing a richer feast for the cultural historian and general student of Australian life.

The Australian *Companion* includes information about authors, works, and literary characters; figures prominent in literary and cultural circles, and in publishing and theatre; painters, cartoonists, historians and historical events important to an understanding of Australian cultural history; and place names and idioms having association with Australian literature and unlikely to be familiar to the non-Australian reader. Nobel Prize-winning novelist Patrick White receives the longest author entry in the

volume, eight columns, but best-selling Colleen McCullough (*Thorn Birds*) is also represented, with a half-column entry. Opening the volume at random in the "B's," one finds entries for "Brent of Bin Bin," pseudonym used by Miles Franklin for a series of novels dealing with Australian outback life, a pseudonym fully confirmed as Franklin's only subsequent to her death; "Ballarat," now one of Australia's major provincial cities, and Victoria's leading goldfields town in the 1850s, providing background for such works of fiction as Henry Handel Richardson's *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* (1930); Faith Bandler, writer of Hebridean Island extraction, prominent in the struggle for aborigine rights; Barbara Baynton, one of the finest short story writers of the nineteenth century, her stories searing accounts of malevolent outback life; "Burke and Wills," ill-fated participants in the most expensive exploration of the time (1860), the intention of which was to make the first north-south crossing of the continent; C. E. W. Bean, pre-eminent Australian war historian; and "banana-bender," colloquialism for a Queenslander.

The Australian *Companion* does not include, as the Canadian *Companion* does, separate essays on the literary genres or on regional literature. Aspects of Australian literature accorded separate essays tend to be thematic: these include the "Bush," a prominent feature of masculine writing of the 1890s; the Convict in Literature; the Bushranger in Literature; Cinema and Australian Literature; Folk-Song and Ballad; and Science Fiction. Substantial space is given to the Aboriginal Song and Narrative in Translation (eight columns to the average half-column entry), to Aboriginal Writing in English, and to the Aborigine in Literature. The *Companion's* essay on Criticism is the work of the contributing scholar, Harry Heseltine, a general account which traces critical writing from its beginnings in magazine publishing through to the 1950s nationalist constructions of Australian literature to the 1970s revaluations of these nationalist constructions and the establishment of the lively professional organization, the Association for the Study of Australian Literature. This article, however, for all its thoroughness, stops short of discussing the impress of contemporary European and American literary theory on Australian literary criticism, an impress which is increasingly

substantial. The *Companion's* essay on Feminism and Australian Literature is good in its brief coverage, although more might have been said of feminism in the nineteenth century. The reader familiar with Australian literary history observes too that the masculine colouration of much twentieth-century writing on Australian literary culture occasionally shades this fine volume: the article on War Literature, for example, is a disproportionate eighteen and a half columns, the longest entry in the volume; and the *Companion* has no entry for children's writing. The Australian *Companion* does give outstanding accounts of periodicals and literary magazines from the earliest times to the present, including a good brief history of the Sydney *Bulletin*, the best-known Australian periodical of the nineteenth century, founded 31 January 1880 by J. F. Archibald and John Haynes. With its strongly nationalist and republican views, the *Bulletin* became a significant force in Australia's move toward federation, achieved 1 January 1901.

The compilers of the *Companion* clearly state their policy regarding contemporary writers and critics: "While we decided very early that to exclude living authors would be absurd in a *Companion* to so young a national literature as Australia's, we have not included many contemporary critics, except where they are also creative writers." Important contemporary writers who have attention include the poised Jungian poet and novelist David Malouf, novelists Jessica Anderson, Peter Carey and Elizabeth Jolley; and poets Peter Porter and Les Murray. We want to know much more about Jolley's wry, humane Gothic fictions, but Jolley's work is very recent. The *Companion* includes migrant writers, among them Antigone Kefala, Dimitris Tsaloumas, Rosa Cappiello, and gives individual entries to aborigine writers, including Kath Walker, Kevin Gilbert and Colin Johnson. Literary historians who receive separate treatment include H. M. Green, author of the two-volume *History of Australian Literature* (1961), still an excellent source for scholarship in such areas as magazines and newspapers, and recently revised by Green's widow, the poet-critic Dorothy Green; and E. Morris Miller, whose monumental descriptive bibliography *Australian Literature*

from its *Beginnings to 1935* (1940) remains an essential reference work.

The researcher in Australian studies will find useful the *Companion's* citing of substantial library collections of Australian literary materials: although it would be useful to have these listed under a general heading as well as under individual collections. The splendid Mitchell Library in Sydney, with its unrivalled location directly across from the Botanical Gardens, holds the world's largest collection of Australiana. (Incidentally, researchers should note that the Mitchell Library will close for part of 1987-88 to accommodate moving and expansion.) The National Library of Australia in Canberra is next in importance, while the La Trobe Library in Melbourne, the Fryer Library in Brisbane and the Fisher Library at the University of Sydney also hold important Australian collections.

The scholar in nineteenth-century Australian studies will note occasional omissions and distortions in the *Companion*. The entry on the *Bulletin*, good as it is, repeats the synecdochic error that the literary contributions to this journal "comprise a roll-call of Australian poets and writers of fiction since 1880," thereby dismissing its own accounts of important writers who published in rival periodicals such as the Melbourne *Australasian*, and of writers such as the politically conservative Thomas Alexander Browne ("Rolf Boldrewood"), author of the immensely popular *Robbery Under Arms* (first published in the *Sydney Mail* 1882-83), who recorded in his diary that the *Bulletin* was "a paper of which I do not approve and for which I declined to write." One regrets too that biographical cliché, seriously distorting, occasionally surfaces in the *Companion*, as in the entry on Louisa Lawson, editor of Australia's first feminist periodical, *The Dawn* (1888-1905). The *Companion* tells us that Louisa's husband Peter has been seen as gentle, Louisa as strong-willed; but we need to know, as Lawson papers in the Mitchell Library indicate, that Peter abandoned his family for long periods and exercised cruel physical punishments on his children, greatly to Louisa's distress. The *Companion* tells us, too, that Louisa's publication of her famous son Henry's *Short Stories in Prose and Verse* (1894) "was poorly produced and contributed to the estrange-

ment between mother and son"; but Louisa was the first to risk publishing Henry in book form, and we need to know that "estrangement" between mother and son was not inconsiderably assisted by Henry's continued alcoholism and his cadging money from Louisa (and everyone else) throughout his adult life. But it is important to state that the *Companion* gives more considered attention, better-researched attention, to nineteenth-century Australian literary materials than does any contemporary work of Australian literary history, and one congratulates the compilers for what they have been able to do: nineteenth-century Australian literary and cultural materials are particularly difficult to represent fairly since much important material remains out of print, works by imaginative writers are not available in complete runs in any one research collection, and important material remains hidden away in un-indexed periodicals and in un-indexed archive collections.

The *Companion* has been enthusiastically received in Australia — received, one might say, with gratitude. The responsiveness of the critical assessments, discussion of areas which have been neglected elsewhere, the breadth and depth of coverage and the vitality of tone attest to a commitment to subject which Australians have not always seen in recent literary reference works. *The Oxford History of Australian Literature* (1981), edited by Professor Kramer of the University of Sydney, and containing sections on fiction, poetry and drama which the *Companion*, perhaps regrettably, does not attempt to replicate, is shot through with a dyspeptic dismissiveness of subject, the section on fiction being particularly unsatisfying in its omission of literary, intellectual or social factors informing the texts. The reader of the *History* who is also familiar with George Sampson's admirable handling of major and minor writing in *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature* (revised by R. C. Churchill), observes that text cannot be divorced from context without serious loss to understanding, and turns for compensation to the riches of the *Companion*.

The Royal Military College may seem an unlikely institution to have fostered a major literary reference work. But in its informed interest in Australian literary culture, the RMC, affiliated

with the University of New South Wales, has had an honourable tradition. It has long provided essential reference works in the subject. Barry Andrews and William Wilde compiled the excellent general bibliography *Australian Literature to 1900* (1980) and their publications include works on Australian convict writing and studies of Australian poets. Joy Hooton's work includes studies of Australian drama and the fine bibliography in the *Oxford History*. The RMC is presently engaged in publishing scholarly editions of early Australian texts. The compilers of the *Companion* have worked with Australian literary materials with a seriousness, responsiveness, obsession (to use their own word) for many years: the success of the *Companion* could not have been achieved without such a commitment.

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- <sup>1</sup> William Wilde, Joy Hooton and Barry Andrews, compilers, *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*. Melbourne, Oxford, Auckland, New York: Oxford UP, 1985. pp. x, 760.

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*We are saddened to note the death in May 1987 of Barry Andrews, a compiler of the Companion reviewed above, one of the founders of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature, and a valued teacher and friend to students and colleagues in Australian studies.*