

1998, with the rebellion in Indonesia, the question of the Australian republic, a test for the labor movement, and the publication of the *Oxford Companion to Australian History*. In between these dates all manner of national and international events are listed, along with significant publications. As is always the case with Oxford books, the *History* is a handsome, well-produced volume.

One tendency that surfaces all too often, however, is the "privileging," as they say these days, of women writers. This practice is not only patronizing, it is unnecessary, considering the number of prominent women writers who have made and continue to make literary history in Australia. As a "foreign critic," I detected another recurring theme: a preoccupation with "national identity." The term surfaces again and again, and appears to motivate some discussions in which it is not mentioned explicitly. This preoccupation, it seems to me, is a positive one: Working to establish a "national identity" through a country's literature may well be what a "literary history" should do.

This 1998 treatment of Australian literary culture and the way it speaks for, to, and about the nation emerges as readable, intelligent, well-organized, and fair. But who knows? Maybe twenty or so years down the track, as an Australian critic might say, a third *History* will supersede this one and exercise the latest critical stance: focusing on texts.

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G. N. Devy. *"Of Many Heroes": An Indian Essay in Literary Historiography*. London: Sangam Books, 1998. Pp. vi, 213. £14.95.

G. N. Devy's ambitious project is an attempt to redress a perceived lack in the area of Indian literary historiography. He focuses on the problem of evolving a native tradition of literary historiography in a country that has borne the brunt of colonial interpretations of its literature. Whether the project has succeeded remains, however, a moot point. Although Devy strikes the right opening note in the first chapter, raising "Some Indian Questions," he ultimately fails to provide

satisfying answers. The twenty chapters in *"Of Many Heroes": An Indian Essay in Literary Historiography* are brief, sometimes exceedingly so: Chapter 18, for instance, which consists primarily of several extremely general statements concerning the nature of history, could more appropriately have been contained within a note. The brevity of the individual chapters is an indication of the book's main shortcoming: a failure to develop any individual argument to a point where it becomes illuminating. For although Devy's essay is sprinkled with interesting observations, few of them lead to any conclusive position, unless we are to agree with a statement made in the first chapter: that "Indian literature is a historian's despair" (1).

"Of Many Heroes" does draw attention to the sense of history institutionalized in modern Indian literary historiography by nineteenth-century European scholars; one consequence of this is the gap between the nature of histories of the Indian literatures themselves, and the "master-narrative employed to construct these histories" (2). Devy's contention that Western models are inadequate to describe Indian literary historiography is valuable, but a suitable alternative model seems beyond his reach. His method of approaching any topic consists largely of definitions of terms. For example, in Chapter 4, he attempts to define the word "pura": "According to V. V. Apte's dictionary, pura means 'in former times,' 'up to the present time,' 'the east,' 'a castle'" (17). In Chapter 15, Devy discusses the word "para": "The original Sanskrit term, replete with meanings, indicates: 'distant, further, enemy, afterwards, beyond, other, far off, etc.'" (143). Devy does not cite his source of information in this passage, which is also marred by Devy's apparent assumption that "para," which occurs in Tamil and in Sanskrit, has the same meaning in both languages. He does not mark the change in sound of the /r/ in the Tamil word "parai" (143), which is a voiced /r/, and different from its Sanskrit counterpart. The Tamil language has two /r/s, and they are minimal differential pairs, a fact completely overlooked by Devy. This is not the only section of the book that demonstrates a far too casual approach to scholarship. In Chapter 13, for example, citing Vangmayetihasaci Sankalpana as a historiographic reader in the Marathi language, Devy adds, "there may be similar volumes in existence in other Indian languages" (111). He provides no evidence to validate this statement. It is a glaring omission, in that what has been the case in one Indian language, need not be the case in other Indian languages; indeed, Devy himself recognizes this when he remarks that the proliferation of cultures and languages in India makes a single historiographic formula impossible. Yet another example of Devy's far too informal approach to the finer points of scholarship appears in Chapter 17. Devy attributes to J. Hillis Miller the remark, "Translation is the wandering existence in a perpetual exile" (152). The note to this quotations reads thus: "I have

quoted from my notes of a lecture given by Prof. J. Hillis Miller at the ninth centenary celebration symposium at the University of Bologna, Italy, in October 1988" (185). The reader is unable to authenticate the quotation, which, as provided here, is divorced from its context. Devy then proceeds to assert that Miller's "statement *obviously* alludes to the Christian myth of the Fall, exile and wandering" (152, emphasis added). Such an allusion is not at all obvious to this reviewer.

Of Many Heroes does nevertheless provide intriguing insights concerning Indian literary historiography. Discussing Pre-Colonial Historiography in Chapter 8, Devy mentions the work of Al Badaoni, a historian in the court of Akbar. Eschewing "period," "genre," "canon," or "language" as a principle of literary history, Badaoni settled on "sect" as the central tenet. In medieval India, other critics employed this principle. Devy explains that genre is not a criterion of organization in Indian historiographic method. He notes that "shastra" literature is defined as the ethical aspect of a text, that section which would hold a moral or sermon (36). Conversely, the "akshara literature, composed primarily for aesthetic pleasure, used a variety of genres and forms" (38). In short, Indian literary texts are characterized by plurality in their allegiances to tradition, based on their social function. Devy's efforts to challenge the usual assumptions concerning categories, and to divest genre of its pre-eminence in classification, is commendable. Certainly he is correct in contending that critical concepts, which are to be used as tools of literary history, must be culture-specific.

But insights such as these redeem *Of Many Heroes* only partially. The essay as a whole is marred by internal contradictions at the fundamental level of premise. In Chapter 3, for example, Devy inserts a lengthy quotation from Heinrich Zimmer concerning the representation of Vishnu, the Hindu god, in a reclining posture (11-12). In light of Devy's claim that critical concepts must be culture-specific, the question that begs itself is, "What is the validity of an interpretation which belongs to the category of the very model that Devy has resolved to dismantle?" Similarly, in Chapter 9, Devy has relied on René Wellek for most of his arguments. This dependence on Western scholarship to refute Western scholarly judgements about Indian literary historiography is replete with irony.

Having announced at the outset that "Indian literature is a historian's despair" (1), Devy returns to this theme in the final chapter, remarking, "Indian literary historiography is like entering the mythical Naimisharanya. In it any story will work, but no story will be the complete story. . . . Every conclusion in it must stay perpetually tentative" (168). This statement serves to reinforce, by rationalizing, the precise vacuum in scholarship on Indian historiography, that Devy has been describing. Without disputing the suggestion that Indian literary historiography is too vast and unwieldy to be categorised, it is still pos-

sible to make the claim that Dey's subject requires a more intensive study than he dedicates to it. His book reads like a primer, an introduction to the reader who is prompted by idle curiosity rather than serious research, to glean facts about Indology. cursory appraisals of the conventions of literary history (Chapter 6), Warton's *Imaginative Savages* (Chapter 9), Bhartrihari's metaphors (Chapter 5), or Jnanadeva's agenda (Chapter 7) do not add up to a comprehensive picture of the nature of Indian literary historiography. The overall impression is that there are too many "heroes" in this narrative, who lead the teller astray far too often. The reader comes to the end of the essay with the sense of a promise unfulfilled.

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