

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Looking from my window seat as the plane crosses Australia, I can't help reading stories into the country that unfolds below. From the leafy street grid of suburbs hugging the blue coast to the channels that run like arteries through interior red earth, from the brown geometry of farm roads and fenced paddocks, spotted with salinity, to flash new settlements staked in the verdant tropics, the patterns revealed in the landscape and in the marks of human habitation modulate like some great epic. Like many an Australian traveller before me, I reflect on the intimate relationship between this extreme, subtle land and the human experiences it has shaped and been shaped by. My contemplation starts with the long custodianship of the land by Aboriginal Australians, and continues on to later visitors from across the seas, including those who became settlers—none more decisively than the small band of mainly British Europeans who landed at Sydney Cove in 1788. Their arrival made what would be called Australia a predominantly English-speaking country and bequeathed English literature and its related modes and rhetoric as the primary framework for giving expression to what would happen, be felt or imagined here for succeeding years. Human experience and creativity would be shared among those who lived in this new and often difficult society largely through speech and writing in English, and would likewise be recorded, reported abroad and passed on to posterity. Australian writing, then, is inseparable from the environment and circumstances of its origins. As Judith Wright wrote in *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* (1965), 'Australia has from the beginning ... been the outer equivalent of an inner reality ... of exile ... and of newness and freedom ... a condition of life [that] loomed large in the consciousness of her white invaders'. Just as the landscape unfolds its meaning in patterns formed through time across marvellous and changing terrain, so Australian literature, as a mosaic of individual utterances, reveals a larger picture: a variegated, lively and quite distinctive version of the

world and its possibilities. In the preface to his landmark *History of Australian Literature* (1961), H.M. Green called it ‘the long range, with its unusual shape and colouring, and its ... strange fascination’. That’s what we explore and honour in this new anthology.

The first and foremost aim of this book is to make available to readers and students a sampling of the range of Australian writing, putting striking works from recent times together with works from the past that have become less familiar. By ordering the material chronologically, in a historical sweep from the first writing in English done in Australia to innovative work from the early years of the twenty-first century, and by encompassing a jostling variety of genres and styles, including letters, journals, speeches and songs, we intend that the anthology show the phases of change and development in Australian literature, and in Australian society and culture more generally. Our criteria for selection include that the work, written by someone born or living in, or writing about, Australia, should be compelling for a contemporary reader: significant or representative or exciting in its literary qualities. Given the vast body of material at our disposal, and the severe pressure of space in even such a substantial volume as this, the works that qualify as impressive and important pieces of writing often refer directly to life in Australia, making them recognisably about Australia, although that was not a requirement for inclusion. The anthology then implies different ways of being Australian as well as displaying different kinds of literary creativity.

The advocacy of a home-grown literature began in colonial times and has continued since then without losing much of its insistence. Looking back on the 1890s, for example, my forebear Arthur Wilberforce Jose, editor of Banjo Paterson and Henry Lawson and an early historian of Australian literature, enthusiastically recalled ‘a naissance rather than a renaissance’ when ‘everything Australian was worth writing about’ (*The Romantic Nineties*, 1933). By the 1980s it seemed that the battle for Australian literature had been won, with the subject firmly entrenched in school and university curricula and proudly supported by national institutions such as the Australia Council for the Arts. Survey anthologies that are precursors of this one, and to which we acknowledge our debt, appeared: *The Oxford Anthology of Australian Literature* in 1985 and *The Macmillan Anthology of Australian Literature* in 1990. But by 2003, when author members of the Australian Centres of International PEN, the world association of writers, joined the chorus of concern that Australian literature was losing its place—in bookshops, on publishers’ lists, in classrooms—those two anthologies, and many works by major writers, were out of print. The reasons for this state of affairs can be summed up as a combination of changing intellectual approaches in the academy, including resistance to nationalist constructions of literature; shorter-term, market-driven publishing arrangements in an increasingly competitive and globalised

media environment; reduced responsibility for cultural heritage, especially literature, in public policy; and the changing habits of new generations of consumers. Thus, our work has taken place against the background of a sense of crisis, real or imagined, in the standing of Australian literature.

The crisis can also appear exaggerated, however, in view of the expanding number of books being bought and read by Australians; the crowds attending literary festivals and participating in other community literary activities, especially the growing cohort who, as practising writers, read and react to Australian books; and the regular presence of Australian authors on international award lists. Things have changed since 1973 when the Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to Patrick White for an art that ‘introduced a new continent into literature’. If there is a problem now, perhaps it is the lack of perceived connection between a more vibrant contemporary situation and its literary antecedents. The literature of the past lives in the reading and writing of the present, but not always visibly. It requires a ‘bonafide, continuous, affined readership’, in author Frank Moorhouse’s words, to make possible a literary culture and hold it together. As an initiative to bring Australian literature to new readers around the world, the present anthology, produced by a leading trade and academic publisher, has received generous support from public and private funding bodies, and from scholars, teachers, reviewers and members of the public—all of which indicates a high level of concern and interest. The moment seems right to look again at the Australian literary archive with a view to framing Australian literature afresh for contemporary needs. As Australian literature enters the wider stream of Anglophone or world literature, now may be the time to engage understanding and appreciation of its continuing traditions, larger contexts and distinctive energies. Hence the editorial motto: *Texts for Our Times*.

In considering how such an anthology might be compiled so as to present Australian literature in the best way for the broadest range of readers, the editorial team acknowledged from the start the complexities of the undertaking. The anthologist’s agony is that for every inclusion there is also an exclusion, given limitations of time, space and resources. By working with a broad definition of ‘literature’ and an inclusive definition of ‘Australian’—from George Worgan’s and Bennelong’s letters in the first decade after 1788 to J.M. Coetzee’s fiction (set in Australia) and Chi Vu’s text for performance set in Vietnam in the 2000s—we have only made our task more difficult. Our aim has been to represent the main currents of Australian writing and to indicate its diversity, including the work of less familiar writers alongside iconic works while also giving an adequate sampling of major authors. Where necessary we have relied on extracts from novels, plays and other longer texts, choosing passages that are self-contained and offer a good introduction to an author’s work. The selection is made in the knowledge that work by many

of the authors mentioned is available online or in good libraries for readers who wish to follow up, and this initiative is complemented by a number of other current undertakings designed to promote Australian literature. We're also aware that there are alternative ways of doing what we've attempted. As Ken Goodwin and Alan Lawson wrote in the introduction to their admirable *Macmillan Anthology of Australian Literature*, 'We may still cherish the delusion of comprehensiveness ... but such efforts are fated to be imperfect and incomplete ... What is printed is, in both its selection and ordering, only one of a multitude of possibilities.'

In public discussion of the project, the question of content quickly arises, followed inevitably by the question of how we have defined Australian. Those issues have been vigorously debated by the editorial team, too, and not only in theoretical terms, as we have carried out the task of piecing together the jigsaw that is this book. As well as the merits of individual pieces, we have borne in mind the connections—affinities, oppositions, echoes and contrasts—that readers may find between texts. The multifarious story of Australian literature involves changing literary styles and approaches, and changing relationships between writers and readers. In the public domain literature has questioned and enlarged understandings of what Australia is or might be. Some authors have actively sought to contribute to the development of a national literature, or have been seen as doing so: the metaphor of a culture that is growing from youth to maturity persists. Other authors are identified as Australian in the international arena by dint of overtly Australian subject matter. Others resist such identification, perhaps strategically, and assert their freedom to engage imaginatively with worlds elsewhere. Among the great Australian novels are *Voss* by Patrick White and *True History of the Kelly Gang* by Peter Carey, works that recreate national historical figures of legendary status. But they are joined on any list by *The Man Who Loved Children* by Christina Stead, set in Washington, DC, *An Imaginary Life* by David Malouf, set on the margins of imperial Rome, *Schindler's Ark* by Thomas Keneally (also published as *Schindler's List*), which deals with Nazi Germany and the Holocaust, and Helen Garner's *The Children's Bach*, set in ordinary, urban Melbourne. Other authors question the category of Australian as a limiting construction and might even prefer the oppositional description 'un-Australian'. Successive waves of literary expression have challenged convention and the status quo: the social realist fiction of the 1930s, the best produced by women such as Katharine Susannah Prichard (a communist) writing against a male-dominated literary establishment; the modernists who broke with formalist conservatism in the 1940s, and were hoaxed in turn by the mythical poet Ern Malley; the Generation of '68, when poets looked experimentally to American countercultural models, and the work of second-wave feminists in the 1970s; and the long succession

of writers of migrant and minority background who have brought their experience and creativity into Australian life, often through translation, from Taam Sze Pui and Judah Waten to Elizabeth Jolley and Yahia Al-Samawy. And most importantly for this anthology, and not without irony, there is the cry against Australian society at its most oppressive and most indifferent in the body of work by Aboriginal Australian writers.

Australian literature is thus cosmopolitan on one hand while having the strengths of locality on the other. A.A. Phillips, who diagnosed the ‘cultural cringe’ by which Australians showed their insecurity about their own cultural achievements, observed that we all live ‘at the centre of a series of concentric circles of felt membership’, from the familial to the universal—suggesting that in each overlapping community, art is ‘fertilised by the ... sense of a common identity and pride’ (‘Cultural Nationalism in the 1940s and 1950s: A personal account’, 1988). In the search for a layering of words to express that complex and sometimes divided condition, Australian literature comes into being. It comes with anxiety about what would happen if the records and stories, the poetry and drama that give us ourselves—as individuals and communities—were not carried on.

Features of Australian writing include the contending identifications of class (convict or settler?), race, gender, region (the city or the bush, Brisbane or Perth, the suburb or the overseas trip?), background, belonging, politics—and sheer good fortune or the lack of it. It can be a literature of impersonation and reinvention, whether comic or tragic, of plainness or exaggeration, of fate and the roll of the dice; a literature of struggle, survival and making it (up). It can be brooding or sparkling, frequently irreverent, occasionally solemn, cheeky, gentle, outlandish or impassioned. Sometimes, combining terms that are unsettled and open to redefinition, Australian literature has a do-it-yourself quality—creating new from old, folding in the non-literary, turning the literary outward to social agency. This may explain the open-endedness and formal indeterminacy of many of the most intriguing works. Australian literature can even seem to be a fugitive phenomenon, which gives it a certain charm. The image comes from the fabled library at Borrooloola on the Gulf of Carpentaria where books were borrowed and never returned, eaten by termites, dispersed by cyclones, shelved in the police lock-up to inspire inmates, sold off and forgotten. But in another way the contents of that library were recycled, lingering in readers’ minds in a tall tale or a fine phrase, a half-remembered understanding or an exchange of ideas that passed across plains and oceans of separation to feed a people’s imaginary.

Writing in Australia begins with the impulse to document and chronicle the experience of a place or a situation that has not been written before. That spirit extends through explorers’ journals and early settlers’ letters home to petitions for land rights and, later, memoirs of displacement. It

moves through fiction such as Marcus Clarke's convict classic *His Natural Life* and autobiographies such as A.B. Facey's *A Fortunate Life* a century later, as well as the work of historians and environmental writers. Yet the documentary responsibility to life, such as it is—*Such is Life* being the title of Joseph Furphy's great Australian novel—so often tips over into something more unruly, fantastic or subversive as other writerly energies of craft and invention intensify. Irony, speculation and passion come into play in the conjuring of language and form for what is unprecedented and unmade. Partly that comes in the will to create literature that can argue with its own origins, as Judith Wright put it in a poem for an English colleague:

I battle that heritage
 For room in another country, want to speak
 Some quite new dialect, never can ...
 Any time I flower, it's in the English language.

But in the flowering of a poet such as Wright the language is renewed and changed. As readers, we share in the capacity, and the responsibility, for that renewal.

The transforming struggle with existing realities and existing forms of expression is characteristic of Australian literature as it reaches beyond normative bounds for new kinds of utterance. It's felt in the sardonic minimalism of Henry Lawson's prose sketches and the contrasting 'Quality of Sprawl' lauded and exemplified by Les Murray in so many poems. It's there in the defiant zest of Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* and the grand dystopic projections of M. Barnard Eldershaw's *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*. It's heard in the unanswerable eloquence of Oodgeroo Noonuccal's 'We Are Going'. This is disruptive writing that finds its power and grace in being so. The quality calls to mind the phrase from Ern Malley that historian Humphrey McQueen borrowed for his study of emergent Australian modernism: *The Black Swan of Trespass* (1979). Australian literature has been formed through the apparition and intervention of many such black swans of trespass, making their arresting and beautiful appeal.

Let me say that no one is more mindful of the inevitable limitations of this book than myself as general editor. There are always more voices to be heard and other stories to be told. Yet gathered here are some of the best, most distinctive, most significant examples of writing to come from Australia. As I look out from that plane window, I am aware of looking through a small lens at the virtually boundless and quite extraordinary country below. In the same way we hope that *The Literature of Australia: An anthology* will give readers an opening to the enduring literature of Australians.