

Refreshing Literary History

When the landmark *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature* appears next year, it will include, among many other things, an extract from an early Chinese Australian memoir, *My Life and Work* by Taam Sze Pui, first published in a bilingual edition in Innisfail in 1925.

Taam tells how he journeyed from southern China to North Queensland in the 1870s to search for gold. When he failed as a prospector, he opened a store to meet the daily needs of those in the far-flung district. Later a wife came from China to join him and their family grew with a business that was still flourishing in family hands a century later.

Taam was keen to pass on to future generations the lessons life had taught him, honouring his forebears as he hoped to be honoured in turn. Translated into English by a young scholar friend, his writing follows Chinese tradition with its edifying exhortations and succinct, imagistic eloquence. I realized that to search for gold was like trying to catch the moon at the bottom of the sea, he writes.

The inclusion of Taam Sze Pui's work in the forthcoming anthology makes a claim for it as part of Australian literature. The text earns its place through the diverse ways it has been read and valued over the years. It has been a resource for historians such as the late Eric Rolls in his history of the Chinese in Australia. As fortunate life, settler narrative, family story and migrant memoir, it exemplifies key strands in Australian literary tradition. And it can be read and enjoyed today for its literary craft and memorable phrasing.

In its adaptation of Chinese tropes to a new language and society, Taam Sze Pui's autobiography inaugurates a line of Chinese-Australian literary activity that flourishes in the work of such contemporary figures as Mabel Lee, Brian Castro, Ouyang Yu, Hsu-ming Teo and Tom Cho.

Another writer who has been inspired by Taams work is photographer and theatre performer William Yang. Yang's family, also from North Queensland, is related to Taams family by marriage. The ancestral text echoes across the generations in

Sadness and other recent works by Yang, echoing again in film director Tony Ayres cinematic response to Yang's work. The work has been revalued retrospectively, given new meaning and life in a way that subtly reconfigures our understanding of Australian literary history. It forms a connective tissue between past and present that also points forward.

As a piece of writing becomes literature, it is read and re-read by different people, discussed, digested, dismembered, recovered, until it enters a continuum of creative experience and expression that joins with where we are now. It speaks and we listen; relationships with other texts are revealed; it is valued for itself and contributes to something larger.

Of all the writing done by Australians or about Australia since early times, only a few works become literature in this way. It's a judgement that readers, critics, scholars are continually revising.

Texts change with time, with some works fading into oblivion and others coming forward into new light. Literature lives only in the present, as it is read and appreciated. There can be general agreement about the literary works that are important, but there will also be contestation of that standing, unsettling any canon. Every work needs to keep finding enthusiasts. That's what reading is. The process of becoming literature is organic, yet shaped by interventions. Commentators, editors, publishers, teachers and librarians are agents in advocating or dislodging versions of the literary heritage. Public policy, through debate about what should be taught and how, seeks the best possible form of literary education, which surely includes the best education in Australian literature.

A recent front-page newspaper article headlined Teachers oppose our literature called forth lively rejoinders. What happens with Australian literature is felt to be a matter of national concern. We have had a History Summit and a Roundtable on Australian Literature in Education. I want to suggest that what's needed now is a refreshed practice of literary history, specific to Australian conditions, to ground the debate.

As sister disciplines, literature and history can have a fractious relationship. Historians value literary texts for their contribution to the understanding of the past.

Literary critics see importance in understanding the historical background of the texts they foreground. Creative writers engage in historical research to fire or temper their imaginations. Different truths are approached in different ways. But literary history should not be understood as merely the neutral middle ground, a cordon sanitaire between literature and history. Properly informed by both disciplines, literary history is important in its own right as it seeks to analyse the relationships between texts across time, the history of literary forms and genres, the materiality of literary production, the influences on the writer and the reverberations that follow an act of publication, the shaping interplay of writing with social change.

Literary history is concerned with an internal history of literary forms at the same time as it is interested in a socially embedded history of literature as an institution. It is at once transnational and local. These sometimes ill-matched inner and outer garments have caused literary historiography to be slighted by historians and literary people alike over the past century. Waves of critics have asserted literary value through their own interpretative acts, producing speculative readings free from the humdrum orderings of chronology. Australian literary history has muddled through, partly sketching the Australian extension to an already charted English literary history, partly seeking to delineate a separate national literature, partly insisting on the transcendent universality of the best Australian creativity, and otherwise doing the humble but important work of archiving everything. H.M. Greens grand *History of Australian Literature: Pure and Applied* (1961) was heroically updated by Dorothy Green in 1984. *The Oxford History of Australian Literature* (1981) was more selective and more controversial. The theoretically sophisticated *Penguin New Literary History of Australia* produced for the bicentennial year, 1988, was a patchwork quilt of diversity, more parts than sum.

In compiling the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature* we have worked with a strong sense of chronology, and a broad view of what constitutes literature, to include letters, journals and the range of non-fiction, in the belief that the patterns of Australian literary history, seen critically and pluralistically, also sketch a history of Australia. In doing so we endorse what Marjorie Barnard, arguing for the formation of Australian literature in an earlier generation, insisted was a central role for the critic: to integrate the patterns of contemporary writing within itself, with society and with

the past. Its a further step towards a distinctively Australian literary history, evolved in response to our own particular circumstances within the multiple domains of world literature.

Australian writing is enjoying a golden age. Just to speak of fiction writers, new books by Murray Bail, Geraldine Brooks, Peter Carey, J M Coetzee, Michelle de Kretser, Helen Garner, Gail Jones, Mireille Juchau, Tom Keneally, Julia Leigh, Joan London, David Malouf and Tim Winton, many appearing on national and international award lists, make this a bumper season.

Alexis Wrights Miles Franklin-winning *Carpentaria* had a lengthy appreciation in the *London Review of Books* on its UK publication earlier this year, with US publication still to come. James Bradley and Toni Jordan have made Richard and Judy's bestselling lists. Steve Toltz's first novel, *A Fraction of the Whole*, was shortlisted for this years Booker Prize, which was won by Aravind Adigas *The White Tiger*; the Mumbai-based author lists Australia as one of his domiciles.

Attendances at writers festivals, numbers in reading groups and creative writing courses, book sales and blogs confirm an impression that contemporary Australian writing is lively indeed. Materially, such success has been primed by many years of government support, through organizations like the Australia Council. Creatively, it emerges from an Australian cultural base. Yet, going back to the distinction between writing and literature, I still perceive a disconnect between the energy of the new and any awareness of its literary antecedents. Students have indicated to me, for example, that they find Australian literature depressing because it reflects Australian history which they also find depressing. This may be an unintended consequence of clumsy official efforts to install history and literature as cultural iconography. I am sympathetic to the impulse among writers, especially young writers, to create a rupture with what has gone before, in the name of change and renewal. Yet I would point out that even by resisting identification with the limiting version of Australian literature that has been handed down to them, contemporary Australian writers and readers are still working with and growing from Australian literary contexts. That's the background against which the books are read. That's the air the writing breathes.

One of the excitements of Australian literature is its openness to trespass and transformation. There are various models of how literatures develop. One is arboreal: a series of branches from a sturdy trunk, ramifying through time and space. A history of Australian literature that places it in relationship with British and American literature, however oppositional or come-lately, postulates a family tree in this way, sometimes extending to relationships with the broader post-colonial Anglophone family, in New Zealand, South Africa, India, Canada and so on. Another model is wave-like and relates to offshore arrivals and asserted identities: English, Irish, working class, gendered, multicultural and, always, Indigenous. A variant of tree and wave is generational, as each generation, often in step with international artistic and intellectual movements, overtakes the generation that went before. But those models don't always explain the great radical breaks: Joseph Furphy's *Such is Life*, or M Barnard Eldershaw's *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, or Les Murray's *Translations from the Natural World*, or Wright's *Carpentaria*. In such works of genius the troubling matter of Australia inspires the artist to unchartered and disruptive creativity. The pattern is broken. The reader then comes along and encompasses that rupture within an enlarged sense of context and possibility. A new pattern is postulated. The process requires what Frank Moorhouse calls, in a happy phrase, bonafide, continuous, affined readership to hold it together as living literary culture. In making the connection between the new achievement and its sources in the past, we readers grasp the creative potential of literary tradition to be extended and renewed. We appreciate how the connective tissue thickens and grows. That's the fresh kind of literary history that can give body and texture to our understanding of what we mean by Australian literature: an undertaking in which historians and litterateurs go hand in hand.

Nicholas Jose has published several acclaimed novels, including *Paper Nautilus* (1987), *Avenue of Eternal Peace* (1989; new edition 2008), *The Custodians* (1997), *The Red Thread* (2000) and *Original Face* (2005), as well as short stories, essays, translations and a memoir, *Black Sheep: Journey to Borroloola* (2002). He has written widely on contemporary Asian and Australian culture, and is general editor of the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature* (forthcoming 2009). He was president of Sydney PEN, 2002-05 and held the Chair of Creative Writing at the University of Adelaide, 2005-08. He will share the Harvard Chair

of Australian Studies for 2009-10. He currently holds a Chair in Writing, Writing and Society Research Group, University of Western Sydney.