

## Report on the 2001 Summer Faculty Seminar in Australia and New Zealand

Louis Schwartz

I was attracted to the seminar because I had always felt somewhat uneasy about the fact that, like many North American specialists in English Literature, I knew next to nothing about the literatures of New Zealand and Australia. These subjects are seldom covered in graduate programs in the states, even less so in undergraduate English Major programs. Books from both nations are hard to get a hold of, and few university libraries have substantial holdings in either area (our own library is a case in point--more about this below). I thought that if I participated and found something interesting, I might be able to study the literature of one or both cultures, and perhaps offer a course or two at some point. At least I'd be able to add a few poets or novelists to one or two of the courses I already teach (Core, Introduction to Poetry, English Poetics, English 299, etc...).

I actually found much more than I thought I would. The preliminary reading I did for my seminar presentation in the Spring showed me that the literature of Australia (less so that of N.Z.) is as rich and interesting as any I've studied. I began to think I might do more than just prepare a course or two. In fact, I began to entertain the possibility of a few years of intensive study leading perhaps to some publication in the field. I thought I might have something to say, in particular, about a number of mid-twentieth-century poets who have been somewhat neglected in recent years by critics in the field, poets who seemed to me, as an outsider, to be of some major importance (in ways Australians—for reasons I'm now beginning to understand—could not see). These poets indicate a direction that European and North American Modernism could have taken but never did. Australians today are more interested in the present needs of their still developing sense of themselves as a nation to pay enough attention to the way certain writers tried to solve certain cultural and aesthetic problems in the years between the 1930's and the mid '60's (when the problems and questions that govern debates on national identity today first emerged in full force).

In any case, I took my ideas and my curiosity about other literary matters with me on the trip portion of the seminar, hoping to be able to test the ideas with specialists I might meet, to think about the literature I was reading while immersed in the culture that created it, and perhaps also to meet some of the writers and critics I had come to admire (a number of the novelists, poets, and critics I had been reading were still alive and active). The trip gave me exactly what I was looking for. Everywhere I went people were delighted that a North American critic was interested in their field. They gave serious consideration to what little I already had to say and offered a both sharp questions and useful information. People gave me books, syllabi, and most importantly, invitations to return during my next sabbatical to study and perhaps to teach. A particularly attractive offer came from Chris Wallace-Crabb, one of Australia's most prominent poets since the late '50's and a member of the faculty of the University of Melbourne's Australian Center. At Curtin, Alan Wearne (another prominent poet and novelist), Graham Seal (the co-author of *The Oxford Companion to Australian Folklore*), and

Richard Nile (Director of Curtin's Australian Studies Program and editor of several important journals and book series on Australian Culture) were also particularly generous with their time. I am planning to seek funding for a trip back for several months during my sabbatical year (perhaps to the Australian Center in Melbourne, where I can have an office, library privileges, and the company, conversation, and connections of the Center's faculty while I pursue a research program in Mid-twentieth-century Australian Poetry).

I was also able to spend a significant amount of time in the libraries of all four of the institutions we visited and have begun to compile a list of books we will need to build a modest collection here. With a little effort we should be able to create a collection appropriate for serious undergraduate research, as well as for my own future studies. Long trawls through new and used bookstores also enabled me to purchase about 50 books of my own for research purposes, a good basic start on a reading list I look forward to working my way through over the next few years.

In a nutshell, the seminar has enabled me to seriously contemplate pursuing a new secondary specialty, one that promises to enrich my own intellectual life as well as the English program here at U. of R.

While in New Zealand, I also had the pleasure of meeting with and presenting my research on Milton to a group of undergraduates who were studying with my colleague John Hale of the University of Otago. New Zealand offers a different kind of opportunity for me. Should I decide to pursue the possibility of a faculty exchange with a member of the Otago English Department, I would be able to make extensive use of the Turnbull Collection at the National Library in Wellington on the North Island. This, surprisingly enough, is one of the finest collections in the world pertaining to John Milton and 17th-century England. A semester at Otago, with frequent trips up to Wellington would constitute a major research opportunity for me in my primary field of interest. In any case I'm grateful for the opportunity to spend some time with John and his students. This strengthened a valuable professional relationship that until now has had to be conducted by e-mail and occasionally at conferences.

The trip also allowed me to get a very clear and detailed picture of what students might expect should they choose to study at any one of the four institutions we visited. I feel confident in my ability to offer quality advising to any students contemplating one of these programs. I was especially impressed with the people at Otago and at Curtin. While Curtin may not be the best place for an English Major to study (doing so would require very careful planning in terms of our major, since students would not be able to take many courses that fulfill our requirements), I would recommend the program highly to any students interested in International Relations (especially in Asia), History, Biology, and Service Learning. Otago, on the other hand, is an excellent place for English Majors, and I think, of all the places we visited, it's the place that offers the highest level of direct integration with the local culture. Macquarie and Melbourne offer different advantages (mostly those that come with studying in a major city), although only Melbourne offers enough courses for English Department credit.

All of this has been of very tangible use to me professionally and intellectually, but perhaps as important—perhaps more important in certain ways—have been the less tangible results of my participation in the seminar. Nothing can replace the effect of even a short visit to a place if you are trying to understand its culture in any depth. Just one visit, by providing a fully three dimensional and fully sensual experience of a place along with a few brief social encounters with the people who live there, is worth any number of hours in a library. In fact, a visit, especially one as intensive and well guided as the seminar offers can give a local habitation and a name to the various things one encounters while doing research or while analyzing and enjoying a novel or a poem. My experiences in China in 1991 have had a lasting effect on the way I think about that part of the world to this day. It has also given me much greater confidence in my treatment of Chinese texts in the classroom (I still regularly teach several Chinese texts in Core). I had studied Chinese history and philosophy as an undergraduate, but those few weeks in 1991 had the effect of bringing my “book-knowledge” into focus in a way I could use much more effectively in my teaching.

I've also benefited incalculably from the experience of traveling in close quarters with groups of my colleagues. Causal professional acquaintances have become friendships, friendships have been deepened, and intellectual relationships have been enriched in ways that are hard to quantify, but that have had a profoundly positive effect on my professional life.

What follows is a revised and expanded version of the outline of Australian Literature that I worked on for my seminar presentation in the spring. I am also working on a list of books that I propose the library purchase, but I haven't gotten far enough in that process to include the list itself in this report.

I've revised the original presentation outline to make it serve as a rough outline of the course on Australian Poetry that I hope to teach in a year or so.

## **Australian Literature (esp. Poetry) a Rough Course Outline:**

Following the recommendations and models I received and came across in Australia, I've decided to organize the course by paying attention to the development of a distinctly Australian literary tradition. I will pay particular attention to the self-consciousness of the process and to the way it changed shape in response to changes in Australian national self-consciousness from the dynamics of the early colonial situation to Australia's present struggle to define itself in the multicultural context of modern Australasia..

### **Some Basic Definitions:**

Of course the oldest literature on the continent is the oral, ritual literature of the Aboriginal Peoples. It's not really what we think of in Western terms as "literature" *per se*, but there is disagreement about what this fact means. We'll discuss this problem later in the term when we deal with modern Aboriginal poets. What people usually mean nowadays when they say "Aboriginal Literature" is largely a modern phenomenon, beginning with the publication of the first important works by modern Aboriginal writers as part of the general cultural ferment of the 1960's. Aboriginal writing in English, especially autobiographies and semi-autobiographical novels, is perhaps the most vibrant writing going on today in Australia.

As far as White Australian (or Euro-Australian) Literature is concerned, there's a good deal of disagreement about sub-periods, about how particular writers fit into particular periods, about when one period ended and the next began, about what caused one to give way to the next, and about what was really going on in them at any given time. Most writers, literary scholars, and critics, however, tend to think of Euro-Australian Literary History as having progressed through four major phases:

- 1) **The "Colonial Period:"** Roughly from the landing of the "First Fleet" in 1788 to the later 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Two kinds of "Convict" and/or "Bush" Ballad or Song:
  - a) Professionally written Broadside Ballads written in Great Britain (example: "Van Diemen's Land"). These were mostly written as "warnings" against the sort of "antisocial" (often that meant politically or economically rebellious) behavior that led to deportation). The tone of these texts is largely didactic, but often appealed, perhaps unconsciously, to fantasies of rebellion and escape. The texts then take on a tragic cast, and deportation seems less like punishment than like the sadly inevitable revenge of an unfair universe on a human urge for freedom.
  - b) Those written by convict writers themselves, or emerging orally from convict and bush culture (examples: "Jim Jones at Botany Bay," anon., but attributed to Frank Macnamara [Frank "the Poet"], "The Wild Colonial Boy," "The Dying Stockman"). Here the tragic tone is deliberate and emphatic, although it is often expressed in explicitly socio-economic terms. Notice in particular

the significance of poaching as a crime singled out for punishment by deportation, and Jim Jones' reference to his jailors as "tyrants."

- c) Also satiric newspaper verse, a popular theater under tight government control, historical and adventure fiction, and a few attempts at a "serious" Australian Poetry that could rival that of Europe (for example, Charles Harpur's *The Creek of the Four Graves*). Most of the writers of "serious" poetry were more important to later 20<sup>th</sup>-century writers and critics in search of early evidence of a "National Literature" than they were important at the time. Charles Harpur's ambitious narrative poems, which tried to tell stories of the settlement of the land using the conventions of European Epic, were for example almost completely ignored in his day, although they are now thought to be among the important works of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.
- 2) **The "Federation Period:"** Roughly from the later decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to the 1920's (it's climax comes in the 1890's). This is the first period in which it becomes possible to identify a self-conscious movement among writers to create a "National Literature." The key genres are starkly realist fiction (Henry Lawson) and the Literary Ballad (A.B. "Banjo" Patterson's "The Man from Snowy River," "Waltzing Matilda"). These become associated with the emerging sense of a "National Character" and national "Myth" that emerged along with the movement toward Federation. This period also saw the emergence of a popular Middle-Class theater under the patronage of the powerful Bourgeoisie that arose in the wake of the Goldrush. Realism was thought of as an essentially democratic form designed to record the real, material conditions of the common people (in both city and the bush, but in the latter more influentially). The Bushranger and Convict Ballads were seen as an authentically Australian folk form that could be adapted by educated, urban writers for the purposes of creating a "National Myth." As in the U.S., these attitudes were adopted in conscious rejection of the genres associated with European "high" culture, which were thought of as "aristocratic" (no epics or tragedies, mate! Just novels and ballads, thank you very much!). The myth these works expressed concerned a fiercely independent man, tied to other men like himself by bonds of "mateship" in a harsh and unforgiving landscape. There is an aspect of pastoralism in this, but it is not idyllic. The city is seen as a place of compromise and corruption, the bush as a place that can cleanse the soul and toughen the body. The land is something upon which the human will can be imposed, but only so far. It never yields fully, and therefore requires constant effort. The human will is usually defeated in the end, but only after an ennobling struggle. The movement was very successful and still constitutes the center of Australian Literary consciousness, even for those critical of the ideology that originally underwrote it—which was Nationalist, Masculinist, and "White" (in brutal opposition to, or in either blithe or sentimental dismissal of, whatever was thought to be "Aboriginal," or "Black").

"Waltzing Matilda" and "The Man from Snowy River" are emblematic poetic works of this period. "Matilda" is itself a very interesting—and pedagogically useful—text for decoding. It, like much of the poetry of the period, recasts motifs derived from the earlier convict and bushranger ballads in a self-consciously populist literary form.

Paterson's work remains the most successful example of the attempt to create a native literary form from the century-old folk culture that had arisen with deportation. "Matilda" reframes the situation of Jim Jones and the various protagonists of Macnamara's ballads in a contemporary setting. The swagman is a victim of the severe repression of several strikes by sheep workers. He is wandering in search of work that cannot be found. The military connotation of his wandering is important (to go "Waltzing Matilda" is a phrase brought to Australia by German immigrants, many of whom took jobs shearing sheep. It's referred originally to the women who used to follow soldiers as they marched, but later came to mean the bundled blankets carried by the soldiers—both the blankets and the women were there to "keep the soldiers warm and comfortable). Notice that the crime he commits in order to feed himself is, again, poaching. The Squatter represents the attempt by a nascent ruling class to re-impose the social hierarchies of English life on the new colonial land.

At the tail-end of this period, with the experience of WWI, the image of the Brave Bushman dovetails with what some critics nowadays refer to as the "ANZAC Myth," the figure of the brave Australian Soldier who proves his nation's worth by dying for England in the war. The experience of the war produced a great load of war poems, ballads, songs and novels.

- 3) **The "Modernist Period"** (sometimes referred to as the "Pre-Academic Period," although the tail end of the period really marks the beginning of academic consideration of the Australian Literary Tradition): Roughly from the 1920's to the late 50's/early 60's. It is in this period that the main currents of European and North American Modernism begin to influence Australian writers. See poems by Slessor, Wright, Campbell, McAuley. Novels of Patrick White. Along with this emerges, or perhaps reemerges, a desire for international recognition on international terms. This creates a good deal of conflict. First resistance arose from those who wished to keep the newly emergent Australian Tradition free from contamination. Modernism, not without some warrant, was assailed as intellectually elitist and anti-democratic. It was also called "effeminate," given its rejection of the Myths of ANZAC and The Bush. Just as the writers of the 1890's were, the new writers were urban and university educated, but unlike Paterson, Lawson, et al., they wrote as if they were, and for an audience of urban intellectuals and bohemians who wanted to see themselves and their concerns reflected in writing. This new writing took roughly two different forms, with their attendant feuding "movements." One was deeply influenced by the major currents of the European and North American avant-garde (especially Surrealism), the other by the more mainstream (if you can call them that) currents of Modernism (Yeats, Eliot, and Frost, later Auden were key influences among the poets). These more conservative, and ultimately more successful and influential writers, tended to preserve traditional metrical forms, although they experimented with them and some wrote in free-verse. In fiction we see the emergence of an Australian version of the modern psychological realism, with serious and ambitious philosophical and metaphysical concerns. The conflict between the two competing forms of Modernism came to a head in the "Ern Malley Affair," from which the avant-garde emerged severely culturally weakened. The major figures of

this era emerged in the '30's and '40, some in the early '50's. Many are still active today, or have died recently and remain influential. Along with the emergence of an intellectually informed modernist literature came the beginnings of academic study of what was now being called an "Australian Literary Tradition." Academic critics and scholars and writers within the urban intelligentsia began to reread the nature of the tradition in light of Modernist ideas of literary value and in terms of Modern philosophy, especially existentialism. This allowed the recuperation of the myth of the Bush and of the realist fiction of the Federation Period. These could now be seen as deeply existential explorations of the limits of human will as it asserts itself on the material world and tries to construct a meaningful existence for itself in wake of the rejection of traditional myths and values. The novels of Patrick White, especially *The Tree of Man*, were of decisive importance. For the first time we also see the construction of a substantial literary canon (determined by these modernist notions of aesthetic value and amenability to philosophical interpretation).

- 4) **The period that doesn't really have a name (yet):** from the mid-60's to the present. There is much disagreement about the various sub-phases of the most recent period, but it's marked by the emergence of Australian Literature as a subject in university curricula and research projects, by the emergence of a significant Literature in English by Aboriginal writers and by various immigrant groups, and by the reinterpretation of "the tradition" and its meaning from the perspective of various academic critical theories (in particular, those that have arisen from Feminism, "Cultural Studies" in general, and from theories of "Post-Colonialism," etc.). See poems by Porter, Murray, Oodgeroo, and Lionel Fogarty (more about these last two, below). As research has been done on the earlier periods, the canon has been revised and substantially expanded by the inclusion of lost works by women writers (especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, but also of the early 20<sup>th</sup>). Also forgotten early "nationalist" works by writers like Harpur have been rediscovered and study, and greater attention is being paid to popular forms, both of the earlier periods (for example the newspaper verse of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century) and of contemporary popular and genre writers.

## **On Aboriginal Writing/ Indigenous “Texts:”**

The subject is extremely complex, but it might be helpful to outline just what we’re actually talking about when we say “Aboriginal Writing.”

1) *Aboriginal oral “literatures,” symbol systems, and ritual song:* as we’ve already seen, much of this for various reasons remains inaccessible to those outside of the few intact aboriginal communities that survive. Beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, some of this material has, however, been translated and/or adapted by white anthropologists, folklorists, poets, and fiction writers. These texts now constitute a substantial body of written, literary material in the English language. These translations and adaptations have often been included literary anthologies. They remain controversial, but it has been common among the recent generation of Aboriginal authors working in English to see these translations as source material for the creation of a distinctly Aboriginal English Literary Tradition. Mudrooroo has argued that these texts, especially the long Dreamtime narrative “poems,” should be thought of as source poems, and that they should be used in the creation of new literary works the way that texts like those of Homer have for so long been used in the West (that is to say, as founding texts, sources of forms, narrative materials, and symbols).

2) *Written Aboriginal Texts:*

a) *In the original languages:* There is very little of this exists. Part of the problem for such endeavors is the fact that so many Aboriginal Languages exist, and that so many have very small speaking populations, let alone literate ones. Publication is unlikely and readership would be small and local. There is no Aboriginal “lingua Franca,” aside from English. Therefore any literature that tries to address itself to any sort of organized “pan-aboriginal” consciousness must be in English. Should the practice, however, come to thrive, it could constitute the beginnings of an actual literate stage in the development of the aboriginal cultures that survive.

b) *In English and in “Aboriginal English:”*

1) Early petitions written by members of Aboriginal communities literate in English for the purpose of addressing requests or grievances to the white authorities. There are seen by many today as the root of all English Writing by aboriginal peoples. It still remains an determinative form of address in poetry, fiction, and autobiographical narratives, particularly in the sense that many of these petitions began with autobiographical accounts or with accounts of particular events in the experience of the aboriginal community. Autobiography and complain still remain the dominant modes in the literature of Aboriginal peoples.

2) Modern Aboriginal Literature as it has emerged since the 1960’s

--Petitional and Protest literature using forms familiar to white readership (especially ballads, realist fiction, and autobiography adapted to some extent to aboriginal modes and subjects).

--Attempts to create a poetry or prose form using Aboriginal dialects of English (sometimes with a seemingly avant-garde result that reenacts the exclusionary behavior of the traditional singers, but with a different and overtly political purpose. Poets like Lionel Fogarty want to force English readers to have to study and come to understand Aboriginal ways of speaking and thinking).

--Attempts to create a distinctly Aboriginal Literary tradition in English that leaves protest behind in favor of a larger cultural project: the building of an aboriginal culture that can adapt itself to modernity and thrive, becoming a source of internal pride and solidarity.