

Nicholas Birns and Rebecca McNeer, eds. *A Companion to Australian Literature since 1900*. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2007, 477 pp. US\$ 90.00, £50.00. ISBN 97815711-33496. **Reviewed by Gerhard Stilz, Universität Tübingen**

If we go by the Camden House recipe for literary companions, the present volume altogether does a good job. It “provide[s] well-informed and up-to-date critical commentary on the most significant aspects of major works, periods [and] literary figures” in Australian Literature since 1900, and it may therefore “be read profitably by the reader with a general interest in the subject” (ii). Nicholas Birns and Rebecca McNeer have chosen to conceptualize their handbook, as it were, halfway between the magisterial, encyclopaedic *Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* on the one hand (first published by William H. Wilde, Joy Hooton and Barry Andrews in 1985, now in its second edition comprising 848 pages) and *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature* on the other (edited and introduced by Elizabeth Webby in 2000 and accommodating ten king-size surveys on 348 pages).

Having commissioned a truly international range of contributors (twenty of them live and teach in Australia, eight in the United States of America, three in Europe and one in China), the editors of the Camden House Companion opted for an open, non-comprehensive concept of “nodes” which they find “crucial” in the national formation and international perception of Australian literature. Such “nodes” are supposed to be reflected in the thirty essays arranged in the five parts of the book (which are called “sections” in the introduction). While the first “section” (“cultural foundations”) turns out to be no more than a chronological list of four pages length prefixed as “Main Events in Australian History, 1901-2005,” the subsequent (and re-numbered) five parts of the book, entitled “Identities” (Part 1), “Writing Across Time” (Part 2), “International Reputations” (Part 3), “Writers and Regions” (Part 4) and “Beyond the Canon” (Part 5), contain five to eight essays each.

The entry point of the book's coverage (professedly 1901, the year of the Australian Federation, p. 12) seems a little forced. Political decisions rarely mark sea-changes in cultural processes. Since, at close consideration, this date in practice does not exclude either prior historical details or recorded reference, the publishers and the editors might have been well advised to expand the scope of the book by a section on colonial writing. Even if this companion confesses that it is "meant to counteract these narratives of emergence" and freely concedes that it neither "presume[s] to be authoritative" (9) nor "comprehensive" (11), the blind spot that falls on the historical reality of the formative phase(s) of Australian writing may, perhaps, be considered as an uneasy, unfortunate and unnecessary compromise. Privileging "potentiality" (12) over conflicts apparent in historical origins and (dis)continuous developments may superficially grant equal opportunities of representation in multicultural contexts, but it cannot really address (and therefore tends to structurally disregard) the traditional power relations in Australia that have profoundly shaped the past and the present, even since 1901, and will carry on shaping them for a good while, even after 2005.

It may therefore be regarded with great sympathy that Part 1 ("Identities") should start with two essays on the art and literature of Australia's "first nations": Both, Ali Gumillya Baker and Gus Worby, "Aboriginality since Mabo: Writing, Politics, and Art" (17-40), and Anita Heiss, "Writing Aboriginality: Authors on 'Being Aboriginal'" (41-59), form an important and basically legitimate introduction to the retributive, anti-colonialist programme of this *Companion*. Yet it is a little disappointing to find that none of the authors, in spite of vaguely antagonising the non-aboriginal racist "other", succeeds in making a conclusive point about how to ascertain, maintain and defend Australian Aboriginal identity beyond the claims of self-definition and self-fashioning. Obviously, such desperate deployment of poetic creativity cannot be fully understood without rationalising the racial and cultural confusion created by colonialism. The two subsequent essays address the complex issue of Australian national identity and provide excellent insight into historically shifting discursive terrains. Ruth Feingold, "From Empire

to Nation: The Shifting Sands of Australian National Identity" (61-71), follows Australia's subtle and ambiguously reluctant transition from colony via dominion to nation. Even though this argument is rather based on political and social than on literary texts, it is a highly valuable and reliably supported account of Australia's hesitant national *non*-separation. Wenche Ommundsen, "Multicultural Writing in Australia" (73-86), presents a concise and well-structured survey of the diversity encountered in Australian multicultural literatures and the concerns raised against the "excesses of multiculturalism" among the advocates of some kind of Australian national "mainstream." It was certainly not easy for the editors of this *Companion* to select those sub-national identities that deserved to be treated in a separate article. They decided for "Jewish Writers in Australia" by Susan Jacobowitz (87-103), "Asian-Australian Literature" by Deborah L. Madsden (105-125), and "Australian Women's Writing from 1970-2005" by Tanya Dalziel (139-53) – all reasonably informative though argumentatively rather down-toned essays. Altogether, it does not become quite clear why the latter article should not be complemented by a corresponding essay – or include substantial information – on eminent Australian women writers right from the turn of the century. Nor is it self-evident that Greek-Australian or other major ethnic groups of writers should be confined to Wenche Ommundsen's survey on multicultural writing. Moreover, the artful dissimulation of *personal identity* addressed in "The Demidenko Affair and Australian Hoaxes" by Marguerite Nolan (127-138), though evidently an unusually frequent phenomenon in Australian literature (including Aboriginal writing), does not seem to be on equal footing with the *social, ethnic, cultural and national identities* handled elsewhere in this section. The "Introduction" to this *Companion* might have been a little more explicit about the rationale of such choices.

Part 2 ("Writing Across Time") holds five articles which can be said to address the Anglo-Australian literary mainstream. Richard Carr, "Writing the Nation, 1900-1940" (157-12), in spite of the rigid limitations forwarded in the title, reaches back, if only marginally, to the nineteenth century, in order to include the *Bulletin* tradition. This is certainly convincing. We would have appreciated, however, if

Carr's most intelligent and readable integrative account had been complemented by a survey covering the period after 1940. The subsequent four essays are devoted to the canonised literary genres of verse – Nicholas Birns, "Australian Poetry from Kenneth Slessor to Jennifer Strauss" (173-89) and David McCooey, "Australian Poetry, 1970-2005" (191-205) – as well as drama – Maryrose Casey "Australian Drama 1900-1970" (207-18) and "Australian Drama Since 1970" (219-232). They all provide good, detailed and critical information. There is, of course, some flaw to be seen in Birns' exclusion of poets *born* before 1900, which actually excludes most poetry written before 1920 – a step defended, with some questionable hindsight, on grounds of the "corporate" quality of Australia's modern verse (174). Defining altogether the basic chronological segmentation of this *Companion* by birthdates would certainly have further narrowed down its scope. Yet, David McCooey, in his sequel covering the years 1970-2005, neatly links up with Nicholas Birns. He stages the generation of '68 and their opponents, deals with the emerging verse by indigenous writers, gives voice to women poets, highlights the pastoral and anti-pastoral mode, takes account of the recent fashions of verse novels and new lyricism, and thus creates a rich and lively panorama. Maryrose Casey's first of two essays on Australian drama sets out by contradicting the myth that the theatrical genre did not really come off before it was supported through government subsidies in the late 1960s. She points out early bush comedies produced around 1900 in the vein of the Irish Literary Renaissance, does justice to the Little Theatre movement with its left-wing workers' productions, includes the rise of indigenous plays (with Kevin Gilbert) and recognizes the dignity of non-English migrant plays. In her sequel, she continues with the effects of the systematic government subsidies for the performing art after 1968 by characterizing the New Wave Theatre with its key figures Williamson, Buzo, Hibberd and Romeril. She leads us through the development of multicultural (mainly indigenous and Greek) theatre, and she ultimately illustrates some of the features of contemporary Anglo-Australian experimental stagecraft. Yet, unfortunately, all these articles recounting the stories of two major literary genres do not sum up into something like the general survey initiated by Carr. Above all, they do not tell the tale for the most

prominent Australian mainstream genre, ie. narrative prose. Although prose is amply discussed under some of the authors portrayed under Section 3, this lacuna in the historical survey of "Writing Across Time" is hard to accept.

"International Reputations," the catchphrase in Part 3 for outstanding Australian literary representatives, is, of course, as much a distinction reflected in solid statistical accounts as it may be considered a matter of interested "potentiality." Our *Companion* privileges six authors: Christina Stead, the "expatriate writer" presented by Brigid Rooney (235-46); Patrick White, whose novels are outlined by John Beston (247-56); David Malouf, characterized as a magnificent writer of Australian reconciliation by John Scheckter (257-68); Les Murray, the glocal poet, diligently portrayed by Werner Senn (269-80); Peter Carey, praised for his "aesthetic splendour, cognitive power and wisdom" by Carolyn Bliss (281-92); and Gerald Murnane, elevated as "one of Australia's most intriguing and accomplished fiction writers" by Paul Genoni (293-304). None of the authors named (including the articles devoted to them, I hasten to add) seem altogether out of place, but the editors undoubtedly have risked more than one might wish by boldly attributing "international reputations" to some authors while apparently relegating a host of others to less prestigious frames of response. Any list of privileged authors will, of course, be inevitably contested and charged with partiality. The shorter the list, the hotter the debate. Why not include one or several more, for good reasons? Restrictions of space, to be sure. Yet, evidently, the editors should have named the criteria that guided them in their choices and according to which the privileged authors were honoured with a place this section, while others, like Dorothy Hewett or Tim Winton, are dealt with in the subsequent section on "Writers and Regions," where still others (Michael Wilding, Murray Bail, Rodney Hall, and Frank Moorhouse) seem to have been lucky enough to be jointly accommodated in an omnibus (345-58). A significant group of eminent Australian writers of international renown (notably Miles Franklin, Katherine Susannah Prichard, Thea Astley, Judith Wright, Elizabeth Jolley, Barbara Hanrahan, Helen Garner or Janette Turner Hospital) are modestly assembled in the article on Women's Writing

(139-53). Some others are spread out as diasporic existences over the whole book. Again: this does not say that one should object to the selection made in section 3 – one cannot because the criteria of the selection have not been made explicit. So we reconfirm: All articles in this section are reasonably good and informative, yielding highly welcome interpretive and evaluative comments. My medals for the most conclusive, most informative, most convincingly argued, and thus indeed best-written articles in this section go to Werner Senn, John Beston and Brigid Rooney.

Part 4 (“Writers and Regions”) promotes a basically sound category, especially for Australia where, due to the sheer size of the continent, regionalism necessarily is still going strong. Some writers can therefore be expected to be particularly good at describing, evoking, perhaps even personally representing one of Australia’s regions. This holds true particularly for Western Australia, as shown in “Tim Winton and West Australian Writing” (307-319). Lyn Jacobs, providing an initial panorama of the land and its authors, helps to embed Winton’s novels in a topography which they both explore and imaginatively create. The following article, however, “Dorothy Hewett” by Nicole Moore (321-34), does not follow this logic of the book’s subdivision but instead presents a rather straightforward account of “[t]he breadth and diversity of Hewett’s work [which] makes it difficult to discuss as a coherent whole” (321). Similarly, Quang Yu, in “Xavier Herbert” (335-43), does not closely reflect the regional issues involved. Instead, Herbert’s undoubtedly West Australian novels *Capricornia* (1938) and *Poor Fellow My Country* (1975) are instructively placed in the context of white and black renderings of Australian racial relations. Jaroslav Kušnir’s subsequent literary quartet “Michael Wilding, Murray Bail, Rodney Hall and Frank Moorhouse” (345-58) does not even try to explain why it has been placed in this section. Finally, Brigid Magner, in “Trans-Tasmanian Literary Expatriates” (359-71), addresses the phenomenon of authors migrating and experiencing their “double liminality” between Australia and New Zealand. Her brief but pointed appreciation of the work of Jean Devanny, Douglas Stewart and Eve Langley can be said to competently deal with territorial issues and matters of identity, though on a different scale. All this nourishes the

impression that this section on "Writers and Regions," though wisely designed, largely came to serve as a repository for authors who, for some reason, did not make it to the more privileged section.

The heading of Part 5, "Beyond the Canon," throws up an intriguing question: How does a *Companion* that in the "Introduction" did "not presume to be authoritative" (9) and confessed that "[t]his book cannot achieve comprehensiveness" (11) arrive at the notion of "canon" and, moreover, at the criteria that discern a "beyond"? The introduction gives us a hint: "The final section covers areas not traditionally considered part of 'high literature'" (7). Obviously, where editors and authors don't "presume to be authoritative," traditionalism (if only as a scapegoat) surreptitiously returns in order to play authority. – But no worries, mate, we delight in stepping beyond. Even more so, since this last section actually assembles some of the most interesting, most innovative and best researched articles of the book. – There is the article on "Australian Science Fiction" (375-86) written by Russell Blackford. A brief general introduction to the mixed tradition of SF is followed by a remarkably rich, detailed and knowledgeable study of Australian SF novelists and story writers, with an eye to typically colonial elements like lost-race romances or invasion fears, against the global backdrop of "the most international of literary genres" (378). Tony Johnson-Woods, in her excellent article "Popular Australian Writing" (387-402), starts with a substantial and most rewarding subchapter "The Colonial Period, 1860-1899" and altogether concentrates on the wide range of non-literary Australian authors such as Guy Boothby (a writer hated by Miles Franklin and respected for his huge success by Rudyard Kipling), Norman Lindsay, Arthur Upfield, Nat Gould or Colleen McCulloch. She asserts their merit, not in the "timelessness" of "literary fiction" but in their provision of "glimpses into the social desires, anxiety and culture of their time" (400). Undoubtedly presupposing that literary students and scholars should also be familiar with movies, Theodore F. Sheckels outlines this long and lively tradition in his article "Australian Film" (403-15). For reasons made explicit, he largely parades productions from 1970 to 1990, with a slightly nostalgic view that turns away from the increasing internationalisation of the more recent Australian film industry. Anne

Mills, "Australian Children's Literature" (417-28), shows that the pedagogical genre harking back to Robert Richardson's *Black Harry; or Lost in the Bush* (1877) flourished in the spheres of British (and, more recently, American) influence. She critically points out that the "verbal and visual traditions of Australia's indigenous populations" have not yet been properly honoured or appropriately integrated, thus leaving Australian children's literature in a state of immaturity.

Gary Clark's essay "Environmental Themes in Australian Literature" (429-43), though touching on increasingly important issues, cannot be said to address matters "beyond the canon": most authors (starting from Rex Ingamells, Xavier Herbert and Judith Wright, and including Roland Robinson, Les Murray and John Kinsella) have been treated elsewhere in the "canonical" chapters; the problem raised by a re-valued thematic concern is obviously different from the problem of generic canonisation. Finally, we have a similar problem with the categorical status of "Australian Gay and Lesbian Writing" presented by Damian Barlow and Leigh Dale (445-458) and correlated with the reforms of state law between 1972 and 1990. The canonised authors in this chapter (H.H. Richardson, Patrick White, Hal Porter, Randolph Stow or David Malouf, all uneasily addressed in the introductory pages) indicate that the boundary between "canon" and "beyond" is permeable, especially when it comes to favoured literary strategies like ambiguity and irony. The question seems to be: What should be regarded as generally recommended reading for certain purposes, and what not – and who should tell, if not a literary *Companion*?

Altogether, the articles are remarkably balanced in length, which bears considerable tribute to the discipline exerted by the editors. The mandatory index in this scholarly handbook is eminently useful. Printing errors are few and far between. There are minor shortcomings and oversights, to be sure, which might be mended in a second edition, e.g. the discrepancy mentioned above between the contents anticipated in the introduction and the actual structure of the book, or the uneven handling of the locations of contributors (most of which are given in headlines of the articles, while others must be traced in the list of contributors), and there is a certain amount of imbalance and inconsistency in the list of contributors

with respect to their achievements and academic titles, some of which would need to be touched up.

In spite of its limitations, however, this is a book that will be useful among both students and scholars of Australian Literature and therefore deserves our recommendation.