REVIEW ESSAY

Horst Prießnitz: Australian literature's embeddedness in oversea's literature finally acknowledged.
Pierce, Peter, ed. *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009. Hb. x, 621 pp. £ 95.00. ISBN 978-0-521-88165-4.

As Peter Pierce points out in his introduction, as far as Australia is concerned, an emphasis on nation-making, particularly in the conflation of political and literary chronologies, coloured literary historiography for generations. One of the outstanding features of the *CHAL* is that it is not another contribution to the national project, but a collection of narratives in which what is 'national' and 'Australian' is debated throughout its individual chapters.

The table of contents suggests a chronological reading of the twenty-four essays by diverse hands within a tripartite time frame. 'From European Imaginings of Australia to the End of the Colonial Period' (i. e. 1900) is devoted to the examination of anticipations of *terra australis*, the complex transportation of the cultural baggage of the mother country into the colony, the literary beginnings, early writings by Indigenous Australians, colonial poetry and fiction and the influence of British Romanticism on the colonial perception of the landscape, nature and the 'noble savage'. 'From the Late Nineteenth Century to 1950' covers Australian self-perceptions, the early histories of the short story, drama and theatre, the advent and impact of modernism in poetry, the development of fiction, and Australian responses to the magnetic lure of imperial London. 'From 1850 to Nearly Now' deals with institutional changes in the field of Australian literature, the histories of the theatre, of the short story and the novel from the mid-twentieth century onward, post-1950 Australian poetry, its groups and mavericks, and what has been termed 'international regionalism'. In between the second and the third parts there is a section, entitled 'Traverses', which links the colonial literary world with the post-World War II period by

surveying the development of children's books, Australian images of Asia, autobiographical writing and historical fiction.

This summary says little about the intellectual U-turn and the special viewpoint of the *CHAL*, which can be circumscribed as follows: (1) It demonstrates that there is a prevailing dialectic among the works and authors dealt with to forge a distinctively Australian literature and the deep connections to the British and European cultural heritage. (2) At the same time it emphasises the old truth that 'no man is an island, entire of itself', but 'a piece of the continent, a part of the main' – an insight that has been strengthened by recent critical studies which argue that a purely insular and inward-looking approach to literary history is inadequate for an understanding of how a national literature is formed when there are influences that go beyond the boundaries of a nation. It is not that earlier histories have not recognised the numerous foreign footprints on Australian shores, but never before has a literary history been more willing to acknowledge Australia's embeddedness in overseas literary currents and socio-cultural developments. (3) Thus it translates into literary historiography what David Cannadine in his *Orientalism* (2001) postulates as a general principle of both political and cultural historiography, namely that there can be no satisfactory history of Britain without the empire, and no satisfactory history of any part of the empire without Britain. By stressing the interconnectedness between social, cultural and literary visions of the metropolis and the periphery, and the structures and systems that unified and underpinned them, the *CHAL* seeks to write the cultural history of Britain into the literary history of Australia and the literary history of Australia back into the cultural history of Britain. This innovative approach becomes fully evident when one regroups the chronological sequence of chapters in a functional order. Roughly speaking, the essays fall into three categories: (1) Explorations of literary beginnings, (2) histories of literary genres and forms, and (3) programmatic reorientations of literary historiography.

Elizabeth Webby traces the material foundations of the nascent Anglo-European literary culture from the availability of books to the influence of educational institutions including Mechanics' Institutes

and universities, all of which contributed to the rapid growth of literacy in the colony and made the new country the largest market for books from 'home', i.e. books by British, American, classical and European authors. Penny van Toorn discusses Aboriginal literacy, i.e. the various modes of graphic signification practised by Indigenous Australians in rock paintings and engravings, and the consequences of the arrival of the British in 1788, which did not trigger off a shift from Aboriginal orality to European literacy, but rather an entanglement between radically different reading and writing practices.

Given the quantity and quality of the novel, it is little wonder that four essays follow the genesis and growth of the genre. Tanya Dalziell maps fiction up to 1900, i.e. convict or captivity narratives, descriptions of colonial life for readers at home, emigrant handbooks, travel books depicting a future antipodean Arcadia, explorations of domestic spaces in which colonial women work and live, diaries of inland explorers, heroic adventure stories, scientific fictions and even fictional efforts, often embedded in popularised pseudo-scientific racial theories, to erase Aboriginals from colonial view. Taking Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters* [1999] (2004) and Graham Huggan's *Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism, and Transnationalism* (2007) as points of departure, Robert Dixon insists that any historian of Australian fiction between 1890 and 1950 must now take an international perspective, since having a novel published throughout this period almost always meant being published first in London and New York. According to Dixon, cosmopolitanism and nationalism have to be seen as the two conflicting forces which shaped the values, styles and loyalties of the period and coexisted simultaneously. As Susan Lever illustrates, the post-1950 novel has discovered the modern city as a site of political power struggles and betrays Patrick White's influence – his pushing fiction to a mythopoeic, metaphysical, and religious dimension. Fiction of the 1970s and later is shaped less by British than American, European and Latin-American experiments: verse novels and mixed forms such as the anatomy or discontinuous narrative stories by male and female writers dominate the scene. Richard Nile's and Jason Ensor's account of the novel, the implicated

reader and Australian literary cultures is an incoherent piece of criticism. Patching together bits of half-digested reader-response-theory, trivia and statistics, it tries to convey the message that it is impossible to appreciate the full history of Australian fiction without recourse to the ongoing importance of the English language, that literature is not what is written on the page, but how writing is read, and that the novel has become Australia's essential literary form and will remain so into the next century.

Claire Bradford surveys children's books from the middle of the 19th century to the present days, taking the first book for children, *A Mother's Offspring to Her Children* (1841) and Shawn Tan's *The Arrival* (2006) as bookends. David McCooey's excursion into what he calls 'the autobiographical mode' identifies a whole cluster of texts as belonging to this form of self-representation: memoirs, diaries, letters, autobio-graphical life writing, testimonial writing and autopathography. Its renaissance is attributed to a set of crises, of the body, of the nation, of identity, of history and of faith. Without arriving at a satisfactory clarification of what is meant by ' the intersection of history and fiction', Brian Matthews compares the reception of the early volumes of Manning Clarke's *A History of Australia* and Kate Grenville's novel *The Secret River*. Despite the author's subsequent model analyses of selected novels and short stories, the reader is left in the dark about which general conclusions he/she is to draw from the fact that the historian was charged with being too literary and the novelist with being too historical.

Bruce Bennett and Stephen Torre outline a short history of the short story. While Bennett focuses on the pre-1950 decades, revisions of the legend of the '90s, international influences on the *Bulletin* school, literary versions of Australia's pasts, Torre foregrounds the financial, ideological and editorial complexities of the publishing world in the second half of the 20th century and characterises short story anthologies which construct their content in a variety of ways, displaying a globalised awareness of, and sensibility to, international tensions or modes of writing.

Linking up with the final section of Elizabeth Webby's essay, Peter Fitzpatrick and Katharine Brisbane complete the survey of Australian theatre and drama. Fitzpatrick points to the fact that the disjunction between theatre as a public entertainment and drama as a solitary art given to the construction of a distinctively Australian voice lies at the heart of the debate about the state of Australian theatre from the middle of 19th century to the middle of the next. Brisbane describes the post-World War II American successes on the commercial stage, the creative energy which grew out of the public protest against Australian involvement in the Vietnam War, the rise of the New Wave and its literary representatives, and the emergence of experimental and minority theatre groups.

While the history of the novel seems to have become an international success story, the development of poetry is one of decline from a once favourite public to a minority and private art form. According to Vivian Smith, the two main currents in Australian colonial poetry were the popular, based on the songs, ballads, sea shanties and simple narratives brought here by convicts and settlers; the other stream was learned and literary, drawing on the whole European cultural tradition and employing language which is consciously hightened and refined. Smith shows that colonial poets were consistently responsive to major political and historical events in Italy, the Crimea, Poland, New Zealand, the United States and never lost their sense of connectedness to Europe and the rest of the world At the beginning of the period (1890 – 1950) covered by Peter Kirkpatrick, poetry was still commonly published in newspapers, spoken in suburban parlours, in schools, in theatres and on concert platforms. By the middle of the 20th century newspapers rarely published poetry and, outside festivals or the occasional radio programme, its performance was virtually extinct. Modernism and its rise to cultural authority after World War I played an obvious role. Free verse did not lend itself to public recitation in quite the same way as popular ballad metres, and since a lot of modern poetry was designed to be ambiguous, it required close, silent study in order to yield up meaning. Since the rebellion of what was to become known as the Generation of the '68 against the well-made, rhyming and stanzaic poem, Dennis Haskell shows, the

dichotomy between two different senses of poetry has sharpened: one that, following modernism, values intellectual sophistication and complexity, and one that values immediate, less intellectual than emotional response. The debate about the question of just what poetry is or should be, has led to the situation that, in terms of sales, money and public attention, poetry has become something like an endangered species in a zoo, i.e. in the English Departments of tertiary institutions. What seems to have been intended as a guided tour, turns out to be a chaotic ramble through the landscape of contemporary Australian poetry. John Kinsella's highly subjective cartography and evaluation of groups and mavericks leads to the meagre result that there are schools and coteries as well as isolated individuals who refuse to be herded together and who work against the grain.

The great majority of essays so far are informative and highly stimulating. By far the most thought-provoking contributions are to be found among the category of histories-*cum*-reorientations, all of which can be understood as extrapolations from, or variations of, Robert Dixon's seminal argument that any approach to Australian literary history should adopt an international perspective. Ken Stewart discusses British, especially English literature, ideas and literary conventions and their paramount importance for colonial writing and possible repercussions of 19th century colonial literature in British culture. He illustrates pre-settlement images of the imaginary *terra australis*, the demands that Australia made on English words which led to a semantic heteroglossia resulting from reshaped British negotiations with local topography, climate, flora, fauna and Indigenous cultures, the colonial appropriation of the conventions of Popean and Swiftian satire, the influence of Southey and Wordsworth, J. S. Mill, Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, Charles Dickens, the Immortal Bard, Gilbert and Sullivan and Oscar Wilde. It is a pity that Stewart had no space to uncover the traces of Shelley, Trollope, George Eliot, the Irish balladists and Robert Burns. What makes this essay so noteworthy is that Australia's negotiations with British texts, ideas and conventions are no longer perceived as cultural enslavement but as creatively inescapable in the formation of a colonial literature.

The question whether the years between 1788 and 1860 were Australia's Romantic Period or the aftermath of Neoclassicism is one that is hotly debated. While some critics, among them Richard Jordan, Peter Pierce and Paul Kane, argue that the Romantic period proper seems to have missed Australia altogether – that Australia, as Kane put it, was some kind of Rip van Winkle, falling asleep as a neoclassicist and awaking as a Victorian – Richard Lansdown offers an alternative view. His thesis is that Romanticism was not only a European phenomenon but a sea change in the Western world that reached not just the shores, but the very centre of the Australian continent. From the earliest days, he illustrates, Neoclassicism and Romanticism coexisted simultaneously, but the perceptions of the landscape, nature and its Indigenous inhabitants were clearly shaped by British and European Romantic ideas.

Peter Pierce's attempt to rediscover and redefine what was, and was not, Australian in the literature of the decades between the world wars is another illuminating example of historiographical reorientation. The experiences on the battlefields of war-torn Europe are seen as a significant impetus for a parochial, inward-looking gaze. At the same time the metropolitan culture, open to the outside world, remained of vital importance, as can be proved by the fact that so many artists and writers left Australia to live in Britain or Europe. Those who stayed at home sought to make discoveries in and about their own country, whether by physical expeditions into inland and other remote regions, or by journeying back to the pioneering past. What Pierce is saying is that the literary attempts to discover the mysteries and the 'heart' of Australia in a kind of creative impulse was simply a profound reaction to 'internationalism', i.e. to the moral corruption of old Europe during the Great War.

Peter Morton looks into the fascination the metropolitan culture of Britain, especially of London, had on Australian writers and artists between 1880 and 1950. The sheer power of English cultural hegemony, especially over the literary arts, was overwhelming. Stay-at-home writers took their nutriment from Britain: they could read nothing, write nothing, criticise nothing, without being

reminded that their literary culture was derivative, stuck fast in the relationship of colony to metropolis. As a consequence, Morton points out, colonial writers could not help being international by having to compete with the literary markets of Britain. Constructions of positive or negative visions of London and Britain depended on individual successes or failures there. It was only after World War II that the dominance of Britain was replaced by the attractiveness of the United States, which seemed to offer writers the greatest congeniality, the most relevant models, and the best opportunities and rewards if they lived or published there.

Australian writers not only looked to the West, but also to the Far East, later renamed the Near North. They did so from an entirely British perspective. As Robin Gerster observes, colonial Australian writers subscribed to prevailing imperial ideologies in depicting Asia not only as essentially different, but also as backward, barbarous and in dire need of Britain's benign civilising influence. Australian Asian travellers of the 19th century regarded the region with suspicion if not with what Gerster calls Asiaphobia. The opposition to the Vietnam War gave rise to a new understanding of Asia. Western visitors created the myth of the Spiritual East, which became interchangeable with that of the Sensual East. Women writers of the 1980s responded to the sexual appeal with constructions in which Asia is a sexual promise, a site for the reinvigoration of female lives physically and spiritually in dreary male-oriented Australia. Male writers responded to what they saw as Asia's metaphysical possibilities; Asia became associated with personal fulfilment and enlightenment. This idealisation has become the satirical target of contemporary Australian fiction.

Philip Mead tries to reconcile the two contradictory streams in Australian literary history, the regional/local or parochial and the transnational/ global or cosmopolitan. The hunger for an Australian civilisation was seen as essentially bound to the establishment of a nation. However, what a nation means in terms of history, culture and symbols, has come under pressure from internal differences over narratives of nation, as well as from the socio-economic and cultural forces of globalisation. As Mead points out, as a reaction to

both trends post-national Australian literary studies and historiography have been moving in two directions: towards transnational comparisons and contexts, and towards re-readings of the local. Mead claims that the remarkable flowering of regionally-rooted literary cultures in recent years is not an accidental phenomenon, but a response to the impact of internationalism which tries to capture what he calls 'international regionalism' and in which he sees future possibilities for critical regional reading and for a revision of theories of location.

David Carter explores the institutional changes and crises in the field of Australian literature as far as publishing and cultural policies are concerned. The rapid growth of local publishing and the gradual emergence and expansion of new and diverse institutions dedicated to Australian books and authors from the 1950s onward, helped to define Australian literature through a set of relatively autonomous sites in universities, publishing houses, critical studies, bookselling and professional associations. In the new century, however, some of these achievements seem no longer secure. Although a mature infrastructure has been established, Carter summarises, it exists within a newly globalised international literary system which poses once again some of the recurrent questions for Australian culture: its independence, its 'national' significance, and the role of literature in general. The dramatic collapse in the publication of Australian books and the profound change in academic literary studies since the 1990s point to a situation for which the term crisis does not seem inappropriate. Carter's diagnosis raises the question whether this crisis has its roots in purely economic factors, in falling booksales and new preferences among readers, in the global competition of regional literary markets or the ideology of neo-utilitarianism as propagated by advocates of the market-smart for-profit university rather than in a radical revision of fundamental assumptions about the nature of man, his creative capability to design fictional worlds, and the social, cognitive and ethical implications.

Although this problem is not (and cannot be) assessed, let alone solved, in a single contribution to a literary history, the *CHAL* must

be said to represent an overdue *aggiornamento* of Australian literary history in that it places the country on the global map of world literature in English as a multivocal, but dominantly Anglo-European literary culture in a state of flux. It exposes the fragility of the concept of a homogenous national culture in that it no longer offers a unified and authoritative vision of Australia's literary history, but a many-faceted collection of stories which could be augmented by accounts of 'How Indigenous Australians perceive their country'; 'Australia's America'; 'Literary fakes and hoaxes'; 'Changing perceptions of the artist/writer/poet'; 'Utopias, dystopias, eco(dys)topias'; 'Religious controversies'; 'SF and transhumanism'. It reminds its readers that a profound knowledge of British and American cultural history is required to discern and evaluate the many reverberations, intertextual relations, responses and affinities which distinguish the literature of the fifth continent. It provides exciting revaluations of familiar works, authors and periods. It gives the overall impression that somebody has opened a window onto the outside world, let in a breeze of fresh air to drive away the staleness of four decades of parochial 'national-identity mongering'. Had this history been available thirty-five years earlier, it would have made things much easier for those who fought many a lonely battle to establish a 'new literature' within the canonical curriculum of English and American literary studies.