

THE 16TH ASAL CONFERENCE

July 1994

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The Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL) meets annually during the university break period between semesters. These meetings take place each year in a different city and most sessions are held on the premises of the organizing university. The 1994 ASAL Conference was organized by the Department of English of the University College of The Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA). There was a total of 185 participants, 10 of whom were overseas visitors.¹

The warm atmosphere of the Conference was favoured by the good frame of mind which is common to most Australian people and the presence of a relatively small number of participants. Conversation was cordial and there was lively and interesting debate at the end of each session.

The programme was composed of a plenary lecture, 30 papers, 3 panel sessions, and 3 book launches. As for entertainment, there was a play, Katherine Thomson's *Barmaids* performed by Elizabeth Bradley and Linda McHugh, a parody night, and a dinner dance. The preceptive Annual General Meeting was presided by the current President, Delys Bird, the Secretary, Philip Butterss, and the Treasurer, Ron Blaber.

Since the conference lasted a complete week there was no need to hold parallel sessions. Accordingly, everybody attended the same session at the same time. This helped to create an atmosphere of discussion, not only at the end of the sessions but also during the tea breaks and lunch periods. This organization was also positive for the speakers as there were large audiences in all the sessions.

The opening session was addressed by Professor Bruce Bennet, Chair of the English Department at ADFA. Professor Bennet recalled the first ASAL Conference held at Monash University in Melbourne in 1978.

The Plenary Lecture was given by Humphrey McQueen, a columnist, reviewer and commentator in journals such as the *Australian*, *24 Hours*, and *Australian Book Review*. In his lecture "Ut Pictura Poesis: A View from Wahgunya", McQueen developed the thesis that literature is related not only to other branches of the humanities, but also to fields such as political science and economics. The lecturer showed a series of 19th century Australian paintings which, he said, had been a source of inspiration for Australian writers. Some of those paintings were appreciated because they contained a narrative, others because they reflected the morality of Australian people at that time.

1.- My own attendance at this conference was made possible by a grant from the Australia Council for the Arts.

By contrast, he reminded us how in art for art's sake the effect becomes the subject. He also pointed out that it was not until the 1880s that Australian painters discovered that intense light can produce the effect of blurring and that light together with greyness can lead away from story-telling in paintings. The lecturer also showed the relationships between paintings and theatre and stated that when comparing painting and poetry one sees that the former is rigid while the latter is fluent.

As for the **Conference Papers**, various sessions were devoted to **poetry**. We heard about the debates during the twenties between Jack Lindsay and David McKee Wright, of how they held different views on essential questions such as the meaning of poetry, the role of the poet, and the distinctive Australian spirit. Another session was devoted to the poet Kenneth Slessor, a representative of the popular culture of the inter-war period.

Laurie Clancy, from La Trobe University, claimed more critical attention for John Shaw Neilson, a man who besides being a great poet, satirical and sensual, was a pacifist and a militant Christian socialist. In the past, Clancy said, Shaw Neilson had been considered "a fey, an unlettered celebrant of nature, an artless poet".

Marie-Louise Ayres, from The Australian National University, made the point that in Rosemary Dobson's work, not only her images and themes, as had been argued in the past, but also her aesthetics are deeply informed by femininity.

The importance of **landscape** in Australian literature was made apparent in several papers. Ros Haynes and Kristen Hannaford, from the University of NSW, emphasized the relationship between mind and landscape. According to them, people can be either observers of what is in front of them, or participants of landscapes, which includes what is in one's mind. Terms such as foreground, background, and horizon, as well as their possibilities, were analysed. The speaker also called attention to the fact that the "otherness" of the Central Australian desert and the internalization of its experience have produced a set of myths which have inevitably been expressed in Australian literature and art. This last point connected with Gillian Tyas's paper in which she argued that "some recent fiction explores the unseen, spiritual dimension of the physical environment". It also touches on another important theme dealt with in several sessions, that of the origin and importance of Australian legends and rituals and Australia's myths in general. On the other hand, Ned Rossiter from Edith Cowan University called attention to the photography of the late 19th century and how it showed that the relationship between colonial discourse and landscape was that of coloniser and colonised. And Kerry Goddard endeavoured to deconstruct Elizabeth Jolley's notion of writing about the land in order to create a relationship. Goddard proposed that the desire for land alienates and therefore cannot have a healing effect.

Feminist writing and criticism was also widely represented. Felicity Thyer, from the University of Melbourne, dealt with the written and visual work of Barbara Hanrahan. One of Hanrahan's main concerns is, according to Thyer, to investigate into the boundaries in women's lives. For instance, the boundaries between what is social and private and what is revealed and what must be hidden. For that purpose Hanrahan experiments with the possibilities of the mask and the role of the "doll woman".

Georgina Mumme, from La Trobe University, analysed Hanrahan's autobiographical fiction at the level of "identity politics".

Kate Chadwick, from Monash University, developed the different views on sexuality and desire and the ambivalence towards erotic experience found in the work of authors such as Mary Fullerton, Lesbia Harford, and Zora Cross.

Another scholar from Monash, Helen Thomson, showed how in Rod Jones's *Julia Paradise*, Drusilla Modjeska's *Poppy* and Finola Moohead's *Still Murder* the model of Freud's *Dora* and the feminist dilemmas of psychotherapy are criticised while different alternatives to cure neurosis are offered.

Vivienne Muller, from Queensland University of Technology, argued, in disagreement with Rita Felski, that in the novels of self-discovery the representations of female sexuality are important. Muller said that novels such as Rosie Scott's *Lives on Fire* and Angelika Fremd's *The Glass Inferno* articulate the sexual and the self. Her opinion, thus, contrasts with Rita Felski who wrote "sexuality rarely plays a dominant role in the self-discovery process".

How myth originates and what it represents in the culture of a country deserved the attention of a number of scholars. Kent Stewart, from the University of Western Sydney Macarthur, questioned the myth of Australia as a young country or the "Youth Legend" taken for granted by many Australians. For him it could be a way of "othering" or "de-Australianising" what is not the dominant culture and ideology.

Christopher Lee, from the University of Southern Queensland, explored the importance of rituals in people's lives. He had studied the social, historical, and cultural importance of monuments as well as the attitude of people towards them and also the connections between institutions and monuments. He paid attention to aspects such as the semantic reading of the plates on monuments, the rituals of the inaugurations, and the pilgrimages of people to visit these sites. As an example, he examined the George Essex Evans literary pilgrimage as a ritualised response to the monument that the city of Toowoomba built in memory of that poet.

Rosamund Dalziell, from the Australian National University, contrasted the feeling of shame and the problems of identity with the myth of British superiority and Britain as home. She went into the case of Kathleen Fitzpatrick's autobiography *Solid Bluestone Foundation* which shows that, despite her successful academic career, Kathleen Fitzpatrick surprisingly describes herself as "second-rate". According to Dalziell, the sources of her shame were Australian culture, her Irish background, and her unsuccessful marriage.

The theme of war stood out in this conference. Besides devoting a panel session to it, several papers addressed related topics. Pamela Murray, from Griffith University, talked of how the two European wars disrupted female sexuality. She also mentioned that the post-war reconstruction required that women were just reproducers who took care of their families.

Peter Pierce, from Monash University, made the point that Australians are still trying to elucidate the meaning of their participation in wars. He approached the volume *Australia Chivalry*, a collection with commentaries of "official" paintings of Australian involvement in the Great War as a revisionist interpretation of the Anzac legend.

Donna Coates, from the University of Calgary, Canada, gave the perspective of those women who sailed to Great Britain to serve behind the lines. Mollie Skinner in her *Letters of a V.A.D.* (1918), the speaker said, is the only Australian woman writer who

shows women from a different perspective, since she rejected the psychological and emotional dependency upon man. The heroine of her book is a nurse who tells the story of war from inside, intimating details that the readers are not supposed to know about the nature of war.

Also related to the theme of war was Ron Blaber's paper. Blaber, from Curtin University, analysed writings by Russell Braddon which deal with Australia's place in the scheme of world politics. He talked of how Australia's ties with England are decaying and of how the country is opening towards the Asia-Pacific region. However, he said, the figure of "other" is still cast by Japan. The author sees that Australia's alliances with the United States are for defence, but there are no cultural ties. Finally, Russell Braddon presented a futuristic view in which Australia is a leader of the world and an invasion of Australia precipitates World War III.

Migration, one of the leading themes in fiction at present, was dealt with in the papers presented by Katherine Bennett, from the University of Western Australia and Marcelle Freiman, from Sydney University. Bennett talked about the experience of being an Asian migrant in Australia as appears in Brian Castro's *Birds of Passage*. Freiman, on the other hand, analysed Arnold Zable's *Jewels and Ashes*, a book in which the author makes a journey back to his place of origin, travelling from Melbourne to Poland to find his own story.

It is paradoxical that **Aboriginal** people, who were the first inhabitants of Australia and have been there for over forty thousand years, may feel alienated and displaced there. However, that is the feeling that they have developed during the two hundred years of white presence in Australia. Janine Little, from the University of Queensland, talked in her paper about the need now felt by Aboriginal women to tell their own stories and how these women have to struggle to have them published. The speaker gave the example of *Aunty Rita*, the story of an Elder in the Queensland Murrie community. In this book we hear two voices, Aunty Rita Huggins' and her daughter's, Jackie Huggins'.

Both **autobiographies** and **fictionalised autobiographies** also appear as powerful forms of literature nowadays. Barbara H. Milech, from Curtin University, contrasted the two types and concluded that it is important to notice that in autobiographies one reads for a sense of voice rather than for a sense of ending.

Michael Stainer, from Oxford University, analysed *Johnno* as the most autobiographical of Malouf's novels. He noted that the novel fails as a traditional autobiography and succeeds as meta-autobiography concerned with and conscious of the difficulties of character-building in a post-colonial context. The basic structure in the novel is voice not character and, the speaker said, it presents a series of unconnected selves. Stainer concluded by saying that autobiography is too simple a way to tell one's life.

Patrick White, the best-known Australian writer outside Australia, deserved the attention of Kate MacDonell, from the University of Melbourne. She devoted her paper to the novel *The Aunt's Story*. The speaker presented it as an example of a modernist and schizophrenic text and therefore labelled in the past as "feminine" in a derogatory sense. However, she said, for Patrick White ambivalence and androgyny were not limiting elements, but rather positive qualities which allowed him to enter into new areas and break the constraints of convention.

John Docker, from the University of Technology, Sydney, also dealt with Patrick White's work. By comparing *Riders in the Chariot* and *Ulysses* and looking for similarities and differences in the construction of ethnicity and identity, Docker reached the conclusion that multiculturalism brings spirituality and depth into "Empty" Australian culture.

The **Panel Sessions** of the Conference dealt with the subjects of academic editions of Australian literature, war writing, and literary criticism.

Session I.

"Academy Editions of Australian Literature" Three editors read short papers:

1. Jennifer Strauss, on preparing an edition of the complete poems of Mary Gilmore.
2. Ra Foxton, on the expurgation of Catherine Martin's *An Australian Girl*.
3. Lurline Stuart, on the colonial convict novel before Marcus Clarke's *His Natural Life*.

Session II.

"War Writing" with the participation of:

1. Don Charlwood who served in the RAAF during the Second World War. He writes from his experiences and also from his team companions' since he collected the diaries of those who died. "I had to tell" he said, "like the Ancient Mariner—it was a kind of therapy for me".
2. Alan Gould, a poet and novelist who lives in Canberra, writes on the Second World War because the events of that war moved him in his childhood.
3. Geoff Page, a poet born in New South Wales who is now living in Canberra. His negative experience of National Service and the teaching of history impelled him to write on the First World War. He sees the conflict between European Australians and Aboriginal Australians as a war.

Session III.

"Criticism Panel" Each panellist spoke for fifteen minutes on an aspect of Australian literary criticism:

1. Michael Denholm, University College, UNSW
 2. John Salter, School of English, UNSW
 3. Dennis Haskell, Department of English, University of Western Australia
- Scholars contended that the question of what Australian literature is has ceased to be an issue of interest, because Australian literature is now universalist and universalism and colonialism blur in post-colonial criticism.

Readings were given by a wide range of writers:

1. Victor Kelleher, born in London in 1939. He arrived in Australia via New Zealand in 1976.
2. Sam Watson, lives in Brisbane where he works for the Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders Corporation for Legal Services.

3. Beth Yahp, born in Malaysia in 1964. She now lives and writes in Sydney.
4. Lauris Edmond, born in 1924, is one of New Zealand's most distinguished poets.

5. David Malouf, one of Australia's most distinguished writers.
6. Alan Gould, a poet and novelist who lives in Canberra.
7. Rosemary Dobson, an Australian poet.
8. John Foulcher, a publisher and editor who lives in Canberra.
9. Penny Hanley, a novelist who lives in Canberra.
10. Geoff Page, a poet who lives in Canberra.
11. Mark Henshaw, a writer of fiction.
12. Sara Dowse, a novelist, born in Chicago, who is now living in Canberra.

To get to know about some of the latest publications one could visit the book display especially set up for the conference and also attend the three book launches programmed.

Book launches

I. University of Queensland Press:

1. Alan Lawson (ed.) *Patrick White: Selected Writings*.
2. R.G. Geering and A. Segerberg (eds.) *Christina Stead: Selected Fiction and Non-Fiction*.
3. Anthony J. Hassall *Dancing Hot on Macadam: Peter Carey's Fiction*.
4. Michael Ackland *That Shining Band: A Study of Australian Colonial Verse Traditions*.

II. Mulini Press:

The Guardian: A Tale by Anna Maria Bunn.

III. Oxford University Press, in association with the Australian National Dictionary Centre:

Words from the West: A Glossary of Western Australian Terms by Maureen Brooks and Joan Ritchie.