

Robert Dixon

REVIEW

Ken Goodwin, *A History of Australian Literature*, London: Macmillan, 1986. 332 pp. \$19.95.

Pope long ago warned that we should judge each book "With the same Spirit that its Author *writ*". Ken Goodwin's *A History of Australian Literature* was commissioned for the Macmillan History of Literature series and is presumably designed for the large overseas market in Commonwealth Literature. These circumstances account for both its strengths and its weaknesses. This is primarily a reference book intended for non-specialist use: it seeks neither to establish a canon by sweeping acts of critical judgement, nor to discover new ways in which Australia's literary history might be written. It is a disinterested and reliable account, going over the familiar terrain in a workmanlike manner. But it is also a study that — despite its valuable coverage of much contemporary writing — reflects little of the excitement that has characterised critical discussion in this country in recent years.

Goodwin's introductory essay on "The Nature of Australian Literature" confirms the received account of Australian literature as the reflection of an immigrant people's coming to terms with a new and strange land over some two hundred years of white settlement: it is the product, to use Taine's formula, of "*la race, le milieu, et le moment*". The recurring themes of Australian writing have therefore been "the search for identity by a wanderer or explorer", "the sense of being an outcast", and "the sense of boundlessness and timelessness". Goodwin's chapter headings also reaffirm the accepted developmental model of the growth of a colonial culture, from "The First Hundred Years of Colonization" through the period of "National Self-Definition" and "The Bulletin School", to "The Uniqueness of Recent Writing". Although Goodwin is not unaware of the disadvantages arising from this model of literary historiography, it does provide a simple framework for presenting students with essential factual material, and may be questioned at a later stage in the teaching process. Proceeding from the known to the unknown, and from the simple to the complex is, after all, a sound educational practice.

The purpose of a reference book is, of course, to provide information, and Goodwin has certainly aimed to be inclusive. In the relatively narrow compass of 250 pages, he spans the full 200 years of Austral-

ian writing, from its beginnings in the journals of the first fleet to the latest recipients of the Vogel Literary Award. At the same time, Goodwin has made the interesting decision to concentrate on the literature of the last fifty years:

While there are historical and social reasons for detailed study of nineteenth-century Australian literature, the aesthetic value and general interest of many of the standard texts is not high. This account concentrates therefore on more recent works that need no special pleading to justify their place in world literature.

Although we need not accept Goodwin's judgement about the nature and value of the colonial period, there are good pedagogical reasons for his focus on contemporary literature, which conforms to the normal practice in Australian universities of working backwards from the twentieth to the nineteenth century as students develop specialisation in the subject. It is probably also a realistic reflection of the kind of study that is possible outside Australia, given the uncertain availability of texts.

The average entry in Goodwin's *History* is not more than a page to a half a page in length, is introduced by the author's name and date of birth, and consists of a brief biography and description of the major works interspersed with occasional statements of critical evaluation. There are also comments upon a range of general topics: the work of Aboriginal writers, writers of non-English speaking backgrounds, publishing outlets and patronage, historiography, autobiography and cultural history, childrens' writers, best sellers and science fiction. In many ways, the appropriate form for this type of material would have been a "Dictionary of Australian Literature", arranged alphabetically, although the Macmillan series recognises "the need for students to go beyond the reading of set texts [and] to extend their knowledge by developing a sense of chronology". Nevertheless, the need to sustain a continuous narrative can create problems for both the writer and the reader. Goodwin has clearly wrestled with the inevitable problem of linking separate units of information by brief comparisons and contrasts, many of which are less than persuasive. There is also a tendency for the rhythm of authors and titles to overwhelm the developmental pattern announced in the opening chapter, and the cumulative effect of brief biographies and plot summaries tends not only to become disorienting, but to forestall any higher level of generalisation. Increasingly, the burden of relating the basic facts to their historical and conceptual context must be carried by the headings and sub-headings, which are not always adequate to define the com-

plex issues involved.

Ken Goodwin's other publications include *An Approach to Modern Poetry*, *The Influence of Ezra Pound*, and *Bruce Dawe: Selected Poems*. Not surprisingly, the entries on modern and contemporary poetry are of a consistently higher quality than those on fiction and drama, which tend too often to be merely descriptive. Goodwin's voice here is more assured, more convincingly judgemental, and original insights seem to arise more frequently from a direct engagement with the primary material. The entries on the major poets of the mid century, on "the generation of the 1960s", and on more recent figures like Dimitris Tsaloumas are, within the limited space available, relatively wide-ranging in their comparisons and forthright in their judgements. They include illuminating comments on the patterns of both personal and executive influence which underlie the literary scene, and the notes on the poets are more like brief character sketches than potted biographies. The best of these tiny essays are the companion pieces on Les A. Murray and Bruce Dawe, in which Goodwin pushes gently toward an inevitable comparison between these two important Australian poets. Despite Murray's acknowledged reputation, it is Dawe who emerges as the preferred poet — a "poet of the spoken voice", a "master of the human heart, of wide and sympathetic human insight".

At \$19.95, the Macmillan *History of Australian Literature* will need to look to its Oxford competitor, which covers much the same range of material and has the bonus of Joy Hooton's excellent bibliography. It is also unlikely to generate the level of academic interest which attended the publication of that book in 1981, and which has continued with the appearance of Dorothy Green's revision of H.M. Green's *A History of Australian Literature*, John Docker's *In A Critical Condition*, and the more recent *Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*.