

Robert Dixon

REVIEWS

Giovanna Capone, ed. *European Perspectives: Contemporary Essays on Australian Literature*. St Lucia: ALS and UQP, 1991. ISSN 004 9697. \$16.95.

Gillian Whitlock and David Carter, eds. *Images of Australia: An Introductory Reader in Australian Studies*. St Lucia: UQP, 1992. ISBN 0 7022 2447 2. \$14.95

Sneja Gunew and Kateryna O. Longley, eds. *Striking Chords: Multicultural literary interpretations*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1992. ISBN 1 86373 089 3. \$22.95.

One of the new buzz words of the post-Dawkins era is “Intellectual Property.” In their different ways, these three books raise interesting questions about “Intellectual Property” in the field of Australian literary studies. The luke-warm reception in certain circles of *European Perspectives: Contemporary Essays on Australian Literature* suggests that a new ethic may be abroad in the once egalitarian field of “Aust. Lit.” — whose literature is it, anyway? Published as a special issue of *Australian Literary Studies*, this is a collection of essays on Australian literature by a range of established British and European scholars working in the field. One Australian reviewer has implied that the volume could have been slightly more pluralist in its range of subjects and methods, and that it lacks a certain “vibrancy” when compared with *Striking Chords*, a collection of essays on migrant writing in Australia — the latter by Australian academics and immigrant writers.¹ Is it any wonder that, at a time when Western Europeans increasingly want to speak on the subject, some feel that Australians are not prepared to listen?

European Perspectives is a readable and scholarly collection that should not be judged for failing to measure up to expectations that lie

¹*Australian Book Review* 138 (Feb/Mar 1992): 16-18.

outside its scope. And if the range of topics seems fairly “mainstream” that is, at least in part, a reflection of how difficult it is to buy Australian books in Europe. About half of the 16 essays are in fact studies of “major” authors — Keneally, Malouf, Stead, Carey, White and Porter — or individual texts: *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, *Oscar and Lucinda*, *The Transit of Venus*, *Memoirs of Many in One*. In this group, I particularly enjoyed Kirsten Holst Petersen’s suggestive reading of *Oscar and Lucinda* as a text “inhabiting the genre[s] it wants to deconstruct.” These include not only the nineteenth-century historical novel and its ideological burdens, but also metropolitan post-modern fiction: as Petersen observes, “Major Mitchell’s parrot is a lot more real than Flaubert’s” (116).

The remainder of the essays deal with general and theoretical issues, giving the collection something of the diversity of approach that characterised the Penguin *New Literary History of Australia*. Developing the notion of cognitive mapping he has used elsewhere, Martin Leer sketches a typology for a “conceptual literary geography of Australia”; Horst Priessnitz uses theories of intertextuality to explore the problem of origins in colonial poetry; Eva Rask Knudsen discusses the uneasy relationship between Aboriginality and contemporary theories of the text, while Werner Senn writes on Australian poems about European paintings.

European Perspectives closes with Dieter Riemenschneider’s wide-ranging survey of paradigms in recent literary criticism, in which it is argued that theories of post-colonial discourse provide one possible way of re-framing critical debates about Australian literature. It is to be hoped that the comparative approach typical of post-colonial studies will break down the assumption — driven by nationalist ideologies — that an “Australian perspective” makes Australian literature our own “Intellectual Property.” As Peter Quartermaine observes in his very personal essay, “Perhaps the time has now come — Australian reactions to this European-edited volume may show — when the teaching and researching of Australian literature can be accepted as open to all interested parties, nationality aside” (52).

My own reservation about *European Perspectives* is not that it isn’t more like certain Australian books, but that it doesn’t exploit a comparative methodology as much as it might have done — perhaps through the deliberate application of European theories, or through the comparative criticism of European and Australian texts.

Images of Australia is an introductory reader in Australian Studies designed as part of the national Open Learning Project, and may be read in conjunction with the excellent television programs that comprise the

Australian Studies Unit of the project. The editors also believe that their collection of readings will stand alone, presenting “a challenging body of writing and thinking around questions of national identity in Australia” (3). This means that the collection has the difficult task of addressing two distinct readerships whose requirements are quite different: the clarity and accessibility of approach necessary for the Open Learning project must be balanced by material that is sufficiently “challenging” for readers more advanced in the subject. David Carter and Gillian Whitlock have done a fine job here in balancing these potentially conflicting demands. The good judgement that characterises both the selection and the presentation of material is a credit not only to the editors, but also to the intensive course evaluation that characterises the teaching of Australian Studies at Griffith University.

The reader is divided into six parts, each targeting a key issue. Part One, “Whose Australia?”, introduces theoretical problems in defining a national identity. The approach draws heavily on the work of Richard White and, in turn, Benedict Anderson: “There is no ‘real’ Australia waiting to be uncovered. A national identity is an invention ... When we look at ideas about national identity, we need to ask, not whether they are true or false, but what their function is, whose creation they are, and whose interests they serve” (23). White’s essay on “The Australian Way of Life” not only illustrates his approach, but provides a convenient summation of the Australia of the Menzies era that was challenged by the various developments surveyed in Parts Two to Four: assertions of Aboriginal identity, the new ways of thinking of Australia as a multicultural rather than an Anglo-Celtic nation, and the rewriting of masculine versions of national identity by feminist writers, critics and historians. The final sections focus on two areas of Australian experience that have been mythologised perhaps more than any others, the bush and the suburbs.

Each section of the reader is prefaced by a brief editorial introduction that is a model of lucid, jargon-free writing. The readings themselves are internally-edited extracts from important works in the field of Australian Studies, some of them journal articles which it is good to see gathered between two covers. Sources include Russel Ward’s radical nationalist classic, *The Australian Legend* (1958), Richard White’s influential *Inventing Australia* (1981), and important revisionist essays such as Tim Rowse’s “Heaven and a Hills Hoist: Australian Critics on Suburbia” (1978), Graeme Davison’s “Sydney and the Bush: An Urban Context for the Australian Legend” (1982) and Marylin Lake’s “The

Politics of Respectability" (1986). Barbara Jeffris' feminist appropriation of "The Drover's Wife" usefully expands the scope of the selections into the field of creative writing, but its very presence suggests that literary material — both creative and critical — might have been further employed to advantage.

Inevitably there are a few quibbles. Some writers who have contributed significantly to the development of Australian Studies are not represented. Graeme Turner's important book *National Fictions* (1986) is conspicuous by its absence, drawing further attention to the inadequate coverage of the two major genres through which that book approaches constructions of the national identity — literature and cinema. Despite its title, *Images of Australia* does not allow readers to engage significantly with visual representations of Australia through cinema, advertising or painting: Leigh Astbury's book *City Bushmen* (1986), for example, might have been used to supplement the three historians — Ward, Davison and Hirst — who represent discussions of the bush legend. *Images of Australia* might also have given its readers more help in framing "Australian Studies" as a disciplinary field. Meagan Morris and Graeme Turner, for example, recently engaged in an important exchange in *Meanjin* over some of the problems affecting Australian Studies. These include a failure in the past to successfully close the gap between difficult theory and a need to popularise the subject, problems arising from the application of European theories to Australian culture, and the danger of re-mythologising the very myths under scrutiny as "the mythologist become(s) the mythologiser."²

If the readings gathered by Carter and Whitlock predict the break up of any consensual view of the Australian identity to which all Australians might subscribe, *Striking Chords* is perhaps the most stimulating collection of essays yet assembled on the writings of the new, multicultural Australia. In their polemical introduction, Gunew and Longley write from a point beyond the grand narratives of nationhood told by so many previous accounts of Australian literature. Drawing on the theories of transcultural theorists like Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Trinh T. Minh-ha, they celebrate, in Brian Castro's words, a "pluralism which decrees that there are only margins and that the centre constitutes an absence" (xxi).

²Tony Bennett, cited in Graeme Turner, "Return to Oz: Populism, the Academy and the Future of Australian Studies," *Meanjin* 50.1 (1991): 20.

The editors' selection and deployment of their material enacts their commitment to a plurality of literary modes and voices. The thirty-three essays in the collection are divided generically into five broad groups, and within each group the range of styles and approaches is wide and varied: there are essays on the theory and aesthetics of multicultural writing by Brian Castro, Paul Carter, Kateryna Longley, Manfred Jurgensen and Sneja Gunew; authors' statements by Kefala, Skrzynecki, Lewitt, Houbein, Kable, Simkus-Pocius, Kalamaras and Couani; scholarly surveys of Greek and Italian writing by Con Castan and Gaetano Rando; author studies of Judah Waten, Mena Abdullah and Antigone Kefala; wide-ranging and speculative essays by George Papaellinas, Efi Hatzimanolis, Walter Veit, Ivor Indyk and Satendra Nandan. Of these essays I would pause to notice David Carter's wonderfully synoptic essay on Judah Waten, in which the "migrant" author and his texts are seen to be produced within a changing discursive field, and Satendra Nandan's essay, which extends the boundaries of that discursive field to embrace Australia's role in the Pacific.

One feature of the collection is that the editors acknowledge and foreground differences among their contributors, allowing conflicting views to stand side by side. Kateryna O. Longley, for example, calls for a category that she would term the "Fifth World," comprising "a vast, world-scattered migrant population of disempowered people who have lost their cultural, linguistic and political bases" (19). Manfred Jurgensen, by contrast, is suspicious of such abstractions, arguing that "It makes little sense to try to group migrants under one common class concept," noting, for example, "the ... gulf separating Sir Peter Abeles from the Vietnamese boat people" (29). For Jurgensen, "it is the creative tension of living a double life which informs the sensibility of multicultural artists" (33). On that basis he would exclude those, like David Malouf, who were born in Australia and merely carry a migrant name and deal with migrant themes. Nevertheless, Malouf qualifies elsewhere in the collection as a multicultural writer, and is the subject of an essay by Walter Veit.

Several of the contributors offer challenging views on the future of multicultural studies which again break down nationalist and disciplinary claims to "Intellectual Property." Manfred Jurgensen, for example, argues that "Judging migrant writing solely from the perspective of mainstream OZ Lit is at best like looking through the wrong end of the telescope" (33). By implication, those in the best position to engage with multicultural writing may well lie outside English Departments — perhaps even outside Australia — and have expertise in various national literary

cultures. As Con Castan argues, the establishment of a multicultural perspective on Australian literature requires a joint undertaking by many researchers, and “The exciting possibility is that it could convert Australian literature into something more than a national literature, into a literature which is a field of comparative studies” (55).

Another notable difference between the voices heard in *Striking Chords* is that between the language of the authors’ statements and the more academic prose in which their texts are received. As Sneja Gunew notes, there is always the danger that theoretical discourses can function hegemonically, purloining minority cultures and constructing the very objects they purport to investigate (39). This unevenness is picked up in the torsions that develop between academic writing and some of the authors’ statements, like Anna Couani’s:

The piece of writing I am about to write is about writing from a non-Anglo perspective from the point of view of a fiction writer who is a non-Anglo Australian ... I think it is an area which has been dealt with best by cultural theorists anyway. I do not have the appropriate specialist language and experience to do the field justice. It is a situation where I am positioned by the context as a fiction writer trying to write a kind of academic prose about myself, academic prose in the sense that it is neither fiction nor journalism nor autobiography. But academic prose is not written about yourself, it is written about something external to yourself, and it is written usually by people who have expertise in the field; authority. (96)

As David Carter puts it, “... the migrant writer is not born but made, and made within a specific and uneven literary context or literary occasion” (109). One interesting consequence of allowing so many different voices to be heard within a single volume is that *Striking Chords* is — as its title implies — both an enactment of that occasion and a celebration of its “unevenness.”