DOROTHY GREEN

STOCK RESPONSES

Notes on a *Seminar on the Australian Nineties* held at the Australian National University, Canberra, 18th-21st August, 1975, under the auspices of the Humanities Research Centre, A.N.U.

In *Meanjin Quarterly*, No.3, 1974, Professor Hartley Grattan tempered his pleasure at the establishment of the Humanities Research Centre at A.N.U., with an admonition to scholars to remember their obligation to show precisely how the European figures they were interested in exerted an influence on the developing culture in Australia. He also expressed some doubt about the wisdom of treating literature and painting as the 'prime paradigms' of the emergent culture.

It is not easy to see how the first public seminar held under the aegis of the Centre could have allayed his misgivings.

In the first place, it was impossible to discover a rational basis for the topic proposed for the seminar: 'Australia in the Nineties'. Uncertainty about what it was the participants were supposed to be discussing and why, undermined the confidence of several speakers and of many members of the audience. The question 'Why choose the last decade of the 19th century for special consideration?' received no satisfactory answer. It is doubtful if anyone left the conference convinced of its importance in Australian cultural history or knowing in what that importance consisted. The papers were confined to three closely related disciplines: history, literature and the fine arts. It was soon revealed that in the field of pure literature no really major Australian work appeared in the decade proper, apart from a number of Lawson's best stories and a few of Paterson's ballads. Of the several interesting works of lesser rank, one a highly original and innovative novel, there was no mention. The revelation of the paucity of first-rate material would have come as no surprise to those who had read Green's Introduction to the period 1890-1923 in his *History of Australian Literature*. No paper was given on Lawson. The paper on Paterson which was fresh, lively and sympathetic in treatment, added little to Green's estimate of Paterson. It raised the question why Paterson was so enormously popular in his day without eliciting one of the most obvious answers, namely, that in an age when people had to entertain themselves and their friends without benefit of cinema, wireless, television, and for the most part without gramophones, anything that was memorable, vigorous, amusing and easy to recite or read aloud was received with enthusiasm.

The paper on Brennan, the only major serious poet of the decade to publish, was cribbed, cabin'd and confined by the fact that his best work did not appear until 1914. The dis-

cussion of English and Continental influences on Brennan was tentative and did not go beyond what most students of Brennan already knew. The speaker, Axel Clark, was obviously hampered by his brief. It would have been more profitable to the purpose of the seminar -- as far as it was possible to guess at it -- to have asked him for a really searching examination of Brennan's prose. Enough of this appeared before 1900 to give some idea of what was interesting to Brennan in contemporary European and English literature, and in philosophy. There were scholars in Canberra and elsewhere capable of speaking on the topic if Mr Clark himself had been unwilling to do so.

Brennan's equally distinguished contemporary, Henry Handel Richardson, was not mentioned at all, though one of her main works, begun in 1897, is set in the Nineties, and embraces in its scope many of the main currents of thinking in the humanities prevalent in Europe in its day.[1] One would have supposed that it would have served the purposes of the Humanities Research Centre as outlined by Professor I. Donaldson in *Meanjin*, No.1, 1975, better than any other book of the period written by an Australian author. Was Richardson excluded because she was an expatriate? If so, why was a whole session devoted to Expatriate Artists (male) of the period? If not, on what other grounds?

The most interesting writer in pure literature, apart from Richardson and Brennan, actually publishing in the Nineties received no mention at all : Ada Cambridge, who in both prose and verse was challenging some of the most cherished convictions of her day. Neither was there any reference to 'Tasma', who published several novels in the Nineties, the most important on the edge of them in 1889. In this she perceived, while it was taking place, that same revolution in class snobberies to be dealt with in detail, thirty years later, by Martin Boyd. 'Tasma's' distinguished career in European journalism was not referred to.

Mr John Docker's paper, originally to have dealt with Melbourne and Sydney in the Nineties, 'with attention to Bernard O'Dowd' was whittled down to O'Dowd himself. From Mr Docker's hands, O'Dowd emerged neither as a thinker in the strict sense of the word, nor as a poet. In the area in which Mr Docker placed him, not much could have been done for him on the first score, though he could have received more understanding treatment than he did on the second. It was left to the chairman, Professor Clark, to reveal his proper significance as an influence on younger men,[2] and to Dr F.B. Smith to point out what the speaker ought to have been doing, that is, explaining precisely how the common stock of European ideas circulating in the 19th century got into O'Dowd's poetry, and what use he made of them there for better or worse.

Dr David Walker got Vance Palmer into this *galère* on the grounds that Palmer wrote a book about the Nineties. So did A.W. Jose, who was not mentioned. This is odd, since the preface to Jose's book goes a long way towards answering the question raised vaguely from time to time at the seminar about how 'the legend of the Nineties' originated. The book also has the merit of having been

written by a professional historian who was twenty-seven years old when the Nineties began. Palmer was a boy of fifteen when they ended and was emphatically not a professional historian. With these reservations in mind, it must be said that Dr Walker stuck manfully to his brief, as well as to the terms of reference hovering anxiously and unseen like emanations from Grattan's mandate; that is to say, he examined certain of the European ideas of the Nineties to which Palmer was exposed, related them to those current in Australia at the time, analysed Palmer's responses to both and indicated their possible effect on his work. In doing so, he shed light on much that had been unexplained in Palmer's relations with other literary figures of his time. A side issue of Dr Walker's paper, the question of the influence of William Morris on Palmer and his predecessors could have been answered by a paper on the Lanes, so unaccountably omitted from the seminar. John Lane's letter to the *British Socialist News*, quoted in Souter's *Peculiar People* (p.199), reveals a strong similarity between the thinking of the Cosme settlers, who were devoted to Morris, and Palmer's.

Miss Margaret Williams had the thankless task of talking about Australian drama in the Nineties and was under greater compulsion than most to express reservations about the choice of the topic. With admirable professional skill she turned aside to show how in a purely theatrical sense the work of Alfred Dampier sowed the seeds of much that was to follow later in indigenous drama itself. Her paper was lucid and unpretentious, and infused with warmth and sympathy, humour and a sense of excitement.

Professor Hope's discussion of Douglas Sladen's three anthologies ignored the issue of chronology. All three were published in 1888 and the poems therefore were by no means representative of the Nineties. Hope added nothing to Green's estimate of Sladen, except to express approval of the principles upon which Sladen had made his selections, principles honoured more in the breach than in the observance. The fact that both he and Oscar Wilde (from whose review of Sladen's work Hope quoted with approval) overlooked one of the most remarkable poems in *A Century of Australian Song*, Mrs Heron's 'From the Clyde to Braidwood', left the audience with the impression that the women poets chosen by Sladen were uniformly insipid. In answer to a question about Ada Cambridge's poems, Hope replied that Sladen had not chosen her best ones for inclusion. In fact, he had omitted her altogether, as Green pointed out in a footnote to his paragraph on Sladen from which Hope had quoted! The contrast between Ada Cambridge's verse and the run-of-the-mill verse of the day requires more scrupulous attention than this. Nor did Hope's equation of the word 'provincial' with the word 'sentimental' help to clarify the issues he had raised. In fact, the paper fell somewhat short of the 'sublimity' Professor Clark attributed to it.

Of the papers on more general topics, apart from Professor Clark's genial curtain-raiser, Dr Serle's on Melbourne culture in the 1890s had a commendable width of range. His exposition of the barrenness of the period in pure literature was an implicit comment on the absence

of clear terms of reference underlying the seminar. Green, in the passage already alluded to, had shown pretty clearly that the decade 1890-1900 was, in literature, a period of germination and expectation rather than of actual achievement, though in other fields, notably in anthropology, the rare masterpiece had appeared. Serle's paper at least presented a clear panoramic view of the humane culture of the Nineties, making it possible to see connections. His contention that Melbourne in the 1890s was an old man's society was particularly suggestive. His conclusion 'that little resulted from the high promise of Melbourne's cultural life' is perhaps the result of thinking in terms of too short a time-scale and of restricting too narrowly the definition of culture. The 'high culture' with which the seminar appeared to be concerned is the result of 'age-long secretions', and in that sense has so far made only sporadic appearances in this country.

Dr Bernard Smith's paper on three art critics of the Nineties was also interesting and informative. His comment expressing surprise at Green's omission of James Smith from his *History* needs a passing note, if only because it is typical of many such comments -- J.D. Pringle's in *The Australian Experience*, to take a recent example -- resulting from a failure to read carefully Green's stated terms of reference. Smith did not publish a book about Australian art; Green concerned himself only with printed books, and when he departed from this rule, it was only on compelling, intrinsic aesthetic grounds, as in the case of A.D. Hope.

Miss Ann Galbally's illustrated lecture on 'Australian artists and Europe in the Nineties' was refreshingly free of vague generalisations. Her juxtaposition of the paintings of Monet and John Russell served to point up the inconsistency that constantly bedevils our thinking about art and literature. As Arthur Phillips remarked from the audience, what would be regarded as rank plagiarism in a writer is considered to be the virtue of cosmopolitanism in a painter.

Unfortunately I was unable to be present at Dr Graeme Davidson's paper on 'Bohemians and Bushmen : Urban Sources of the Australian Legend'. Some of my remarks may have to be qualified by reference to this paper and to Professor Kable's on the University of Sydney, which I also missed.

It is, however, the striking omissions from the subject list of the seminar which leave the greatest impression. The omission of Lawson and Richardson has already been mentioned. But without specific directions that the title of the seminar referred only to writers and painters and to those of the first rank (in which case why was O'Dowd included?), on what grounds were the following excluded: Louis Becke, Ernest Favenc, Steele Rudd, A.J. Dawson, Nat Gould, Price Warung, Barcroft Boake, Francis Adams, to name only a few interesting writers publishing during the decade? Dawson's novel, one might have expected, would have been peculiarly suited to the concerns of the Humanities Research Centre. The most glaring omissions were those of women writers, scholars and thinkers.[3] How was it possible to talk about the Nineties without

mentioning Mary Gilmore, her associations with William Lane and her place in the whole Utopian movement of the 19th century? Mary Gilmore began contributing to *New Australia* soon after it was founded in 1892; she did not go to Paraguay until 1896, and she was back in Australia in 1900, so that she fits well into the prescribed strait-jacket. If Palmer rated a paper on the score of a book about the Nineties published in 1954, so surely does a woman so much a part of the decade, whose influence, it is arguable, was far more widespread than that of O'Dowd.

The other inexplicable omission was that of the notable pioneer of women's suffrage, Rose Scott. Miss Scott's 'salon' in Sydney during the Nineties was frequented by most of the outstanding men and women of the day: Reid, Barton, Lyne, Wise, Hughes, Holman, Deakin, the Garrans, the Davids, Louisa Macdonald, William Lane, E. Phillips Fox, Frank Fox, to take only a random selection. She was visited by Ramsay Macdonald, the Webbs, and Walter Burley Griffin. She knew Kendall, Daley, Barbara Baynton, three generations of the Lawsons, Paterson and O'Dowd, as well as many other writers. Mary Gilmore wrote poems about her. She was on friendly terms with every variety of clergyman in her parish, was acquainted with Cardinal Moran and was an associate of Archbishop Kelly in his work for prison reform. For what possible reason could Rose Scott, Mary Gilmore or Ada Cambridge have been omitted from a seminar on Australia in the Nineties? It is nonsense to say that there was no-one to give papers on these women. Those at hand who could have (a) suggested their inclusion and (b) presented papers on them, were never consulted.

The same bias, which it is kindest to call unconscious, against women, was reflected in the list of speakers. Of the thirteen, eleven were men. One of the 'chairmen' was a woman, and another woman was allowed to entertain the guests with songs on the opening night. It will be considered indecent in academic circles to raise this issue, and the usual stock responses, the familiar put-downs of 'paranoia', 'feminine anger', 'touchiness', 'offended vanity' and so forth will be trotted out in reply to the challenge, as a substitute for an open, honest, logical debate on the whole question of the design and purpose of the conference. These are some of the phrases to which men resort when women have the temerity to point out in print even their simple factual errors. To venture to criticise the logic of a collective academic exercise therefore, is to offer one's neck to the knife, in spite of the fact that one's misgivings were shared by a significant proportion of those who attended the seminar, both male and female. It remains as difficult as it ever was to gain the same acceptance of criticism from women as from men; few are willing to consider women capable of impersonal concern for the dignity of a subject. Literary critics, indeed, are the least likely to do so. As I have argued elsewhere, they, unlike the more reputable kind of scientist, avoid genuine cut-and-thrust debate. Their attitude indeed is curiously like that commonly and wrongly attributed to women: with some honourable exceptions, they tend to have vested interests in maintaining their hypotheses, especially if these

hypotheses are challenged by women. If anyone wishes for documentary evidence on this last point, I shall be more than happy to provide it.

What the conference in general sadly lacked was an infusion from other disciplines with a more rigorous methodology, an infusion which the title of the seminar encouraged one to expect. There was no paper on philosophy, though it is impossible to believe that the work and influence of Australia's first professor of philosophy, Henry Laurie, had no relevance to the Humanities Centre's interest in the Nineties. Since the chronology rules were bent to include Sladen and Palmer, could they not have been bent to include Mitchell's *Structure and Growth of the Mind* (1907), a book of considerable importance in the history of 19th century philosophy?[4] And, one might add, of some importance to a discussion of the psychology of the artist.

There was no paper on psychology, though the general interest in this study that was stirring in the Nineties must surely have had some influence on some of its writers. That it certainly did on Henry Handel Richardson is beyond dispute.

There was no paper on political science, though Jethro Brown's *The New Democracy* (1899) might conceivably have been of some interest to those prepared to be interested in O'Dowd. Strangest of all perhaps was the omission of any paper on Deakin, who straddled both politics and literature, especially since his *Federal Story* fits the time-span exactly and was begun in 1898.

Almost as strange was the omission of any reference to anthropology, though this was the branch of culture along which it might be claimed that Australia made her most distinguished contribution to civilisation during the Nineties. In 1899, Spencer and Gillen published their *Native Tribes of Central Australia*, a work which as well as belonging triumphantly to science belongs also to literature. Did it occur to no-one to ask D.J. Mulvaney, at hand in Canberra, to speak about it and its influence?

As Professor Bill Williams pointed out in a radio broad-cast almost a year ago, there are other cultures besides the purely verbal ones.

A seminar at which five of the thirteen papers were given by historians, four by scholars in English, three (with a last-minute omission) by scholars in the Fine Arts, and one by a drama historian, surely needed a far less comprehensive title than 'Australia in the Nineties'. The claustrophobic atmosphere contradicting this title was not dissipated by the decidedly Melbourne-bias of the seminar, as apparent in the choice of speakers and chairmen as in the choice of topics.

It is to be hoped that coterie-discussions of this kind, and of this, to say the least, uneven standard, are not to be typical of the public seminars offered by the Humanities Research Centre. Otherwise it would be difficult to see how the expenditure involved could be justified to the taxpayers. The time has passed when an exercise of this kind could be seen to have any significant contribution to make to the history of culture in Australia: the omissions were too glaring and the emphasis on literature and painting

as the 'prime paradigms' too obvious. Moreover, if special emphasis is to be given to literature, then what Australian literature needs more urgently than anything else at the moment is not more 'talk-talk' about itself, but far greater ease of access to its primary productions. I do not know the total amount of money spent on holding this seminar, but I suspect it would have been enough to bring back into print, in an authoritative and cheap edition, at least one novel by Ada Cambridge or Grant Watson, or to publish Catherine Spence's *Handfasted*, a novel still in manuscript in a South Australian library. The problem for Australian writers is not that they have no 'usable past', but that it has been, for too long, 'locked up'. If the Humanities Research Centre did no more than unlock it for the general reader, as Penguin Books, for example, unlocked Shakespeare's plays, it would more than justify its existence.

Notes

1. Richardson had actually published, in 1896, the first English translation of a novel widely influential in Continental literature; Jacobsen's *Niels Lyhne*.
2. A point already made in some detail by Green.
3. Could none of the historians present have said something about Marion Phillips's *A Colonial Autocracy* (1909), a pioneering work in its field?
4. Could the rules not also have been bent to include at least a glance at Havelock Ellis's *Kanga Creek*, a book begun in the middle eighties, which contradicts most of the stereotyped views about 'provincialism' aired from time to time at the seminar and elsewhere? Moreover the influence of the early volumes of Ellis's *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1897-1928) should not be hard to trace in Australian writing of the turn of the century, like that of Maudsley's *Body and Mind*.