

A place too big: Australia as a collection of regions

The Australia I grew up in had seven million people, a third of what we have today (2009). Our land mass is not quite as big as America and somewhat smaller than China but it's the emptiness, the vast areas not filled with anything, that give us a feeling of our country's size. We come now to the greatest paradox about this land – its unity. We can go to the bottom of Tasmania and find our way back, up the coast or inland, to Cape York, and, though the country will be changing all the way, and the vegetation and the birds, the transitions will be gradual; we won't have a feeling of separation, of losing one thing and entering another, or if we do, it will always be within a feeling of connection, one part to another. The same holds true when we travel east to west, or west to east. Despite the Nullarbor and other desolate stretches from the Kimberleys to the Bight, we'll never be in doubt that our move is being made across one great land. There are state boundaries of course, but as we cross them, they feel artificial; the land, we tell ourselves, has no idea that it's changed from being Queensland to being New South Wales!

Against this unity, however, there's diversity. The simplest way to see this is to look at a map – and they exist, these days – showing the locales of Australia's aboriginal groups, pre-white settlement. The land mass so inscribed breaks up into scores of territories, with not a straight line in sight because the aboriginal boundaries were responsive to local conditions – water, things to eat. It's hard to imagine two aboriginal groups separating

themselves along a watercourse, as New South Wales and Victoria did in 1851, nor laying down a state for a settlement, as the English governors did when they created the states which consolidated to form our country. It's hard to imagine aboriginal groups settling a boundary along a line because they didn't understand the land that way. The straight line, which has been such a factor in Australia's settlement, is a statement deriving more from ignorance, or perhaps indifference, than from knowledge. Knowledge is more inclined to cluster than to separate and if we think back to the days before white settlement, the clustering of knowledge took place among mobile or even very mobile groups, so that it was an endlessly changing map that we'd need to draw to schematise the life and knowledge of the great south land.

And yet, for better or for worse, we speak of the Australian character, Australian literature, the Australian parliament in the national capital, surmounted by our flag, and defended by our navy, army, et cetera. We speak – or we don't, depending on where we stand on certain matters – of Australia's literature, our music, our arts. We speak of a national opera company, a national ballet, as we speak of a national cricket team, of which we're meant to be proud.

And yet, again, this can only go so far because it isn't exactly how we feel about our country, a place of many different parts as much as it's a whole. I'm thinking of something which surprised

many readers when it appeared in 1964, a piece by Hal Porter about South Gippsland (1), where he was living with his sister and her husband at Hedley, near Yarram. He'd been drawing as he moved about the district, and he would never have lacked for people to take him around, he'd been observing in his sharpest way, and he set down what he'd seen:

Fashionable painters would have the world of mugs believe, it seems, that Australia is a beige waste littered with dehydrated tree-roots, blanched heifer-skulls, and larrikin Kellys. That, maybe, is one truth. It does not work for South Gippsland, Victoria, where, for example, in November, ditches and drains and soggy depressions are clogged to overbrimming with lacquered buttercups; hawthorn hedges are clotted with curds of blossom; here are dandelions and brier roses and gorse – pre-Raphaelite stuff, dewdrops and all.

His characterisation of South Gippsland goes on for pages, drawings and all. It was an Australia, or part thereof, that he loved, understood, and made his home for some years. This I understand well; I fell in love with Gippsland, though I'd come from the Riverina, and had only to return to it, after a few years away, to know that something of me would always belong to the places where my father and his father had come from, in and among the stretches of flat land where the Murray and its tributaries and billabongs dawdled between their mountains and the sea. From plains to mountains! The basis of my life had shifted, and I'd added to one understanding, one set of lore and legend, another, long known to others but new to me.

Years passed, as I am fond of saying, and other regions opened for me. Far north Queensland, central Australia, stretches of Tasmania, and the south-west of the country too, where the Southern Ocean and the Indian Ocean bump each other for access to the beaches of Australia's far left corner, as one looks at a map. What a huge, what a varied yet marvellously unified place! But one place, or many, or both?

This is where our writers come in. It's both, but it's only when we know the regions that we can merge them to know the unity as well. The whole is made up of the parts, and some of these parts have been explored, others not, some have been well expressed while others wait for voices to bring them to life. If you go to north-east Victoria, zone of the Kelly gang, follow them down to Euroa or up to Jerilderie for their hold-ups, you'll find writers there, Max Brown among them with his *Australian Son*, and once the shooting's died away at Glenrowan you can follow Max to the western outback in *The Jimberi Track* and *The Black Eureka* (both Australasian Book Society, 1966 and 1976), or in some of the stories in his later collection, *Buttered Toast*, (Turton & Armstrong, Sydney, 1999). You can drop down to the bottom of Western Australia for Katherine Susannah Prichard's *Working Bullocks* or you can swing up to the goldfields for Gavin Casey's *It's Harder for Girls*. You can go after Christopher Koch (*To the Islands, The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*), or Donald Stuart (*Yandy*). The land has been given an imaginative dimension that will spring to life whenever there's a downpour of interest ... something which happens all too rarely, I fear, in an age saturated with entertainments manufactured for the soothing

of our minds. Writers are normally described, in a way that suits publishers, as wanting to meet the public via sales, but what writers want is readers, and having worked long and hard in their solitary cells, they'll take any path that's offered to reach them; hence their ease of control for publishers. Writers are occasionally, however, glimpsed with other writers; here's Hal Porter again, talking of his compatriot scribblers in Adelaide, not long after an account of a vastly different meet of writers in Edinburgh, where exhibitionism knew no bounds:

What's intoxicating about them off-stage isn't so much their being members of one craft, or individually remarkable, but their high-lighted Australianism. It's they, not politicians or academics, gurus or other picturesque lunatics who, by their solitary labours, give a phosphorescent glow to the name 'Australia'. It's they who strain to grasp the ungraspable, and leave their findings for Posterity to prowling around sniffing at truths about a unique continent. Journalists make sordid events seem more commonplace and one-dimensional than they are. Authors, desiring to leave a deeper and more permanent impress on the sensibilities, deal in many dimensions.

He goes on to list names, some of them behind him in the past, others contemporary:

Henry Handel Richardson, Eleanor Dark, Kenneth Mackenzie, T.A.G. Hungerford, Eve Langley, Kylie Tennant, Miles Franklin, Thea Astley, Vance Palmer, Marjorie Barnard, George Turner, Thelma Forshaw, Randolph Stow, Ian Mudie, Elizabeth Riddell, Nancy Phelan, Hugh Atkinson ... the cavalcade is long, and stumbles by silhouetted against its

own perpetual sunset ... leave gift-wrapped observations for the unborn to read.

'Perpetual sunset': what does he mean? I think he's referring to the thing that caused him in the same book (*The Extra*) to tell us about the last time he saw each of a number of writers he's known, notably Kenneth Slessor (Farewell, thou pilferer!), a man brought marvellously to life in Porter's pages. We might say that they all live, even if only mentioned, because their work's acknowledged as bringing the country to life inside the minds of those who dwell in it. Their books, their poems, may be ignored but they simply refuse to drop completely from sight. Once printed, and brought to life in a few readers' imaginations, they exist. Whatever's cased inside them is always available, now, for anyone who cares to look. The saying is the thing. The perceptions would be lost if not recorded, but, having once been recorded, they can lie dormant for decades, quiescent but innately challenging, invigorating to anyone who bothers to notice, and listen.

Writers, even the blustery, self-opinionated ones, are the self-analysis of a society, the inner life, the source of ideas and inner consideration. Life goes on around us every minute of every day, but then it all happens again, inside the imagination, brought back to be considered in another way by those who have a gift for this sort of thing. There will always be writers we can relate to easily and others who are closed books. This is nothing new. We have to find, each of us, those writers who quicken our minds so that we live our lives – or those parts of it we're prepared to face again – a second time. It's commonly said that those who aren't prepared to

learn from history – history and story are basically the same word – are condemned to repeat it; we could add to that the thought that those who can't repeat their lives inside their imaginations hardly live a first time, let alone a second. Half a century ago it was common for psychologists of a certain sort to talk about humanity's hierarchy of needs, but these people never had any place on their variously constructed ladders for the imagination, which should have been placed, sitting, on the very first, and top, rung! Mankind without its imagination in full flight isn't even alive, and it's in the imaginations of artists, writers among them, that the rebirthing takes place. Writing is no luxury, it's one of our most important activities, a surprising number of people aspire to do it, but only a limited number of them achieve very much. Every second person says 'I could write a book!' and there's also the saying that there's at least one book in every life, if only the story could be written.

The stories are written, of course, by the people whose work I've been considering, but readers, and even more the non-readers, in this country have been shy of giving writers and their books what's due to them. This is why, finally, this series of essays is being written, but I fear I have broadened my discourse a little too far and too early, so let me now restate my theme of my country's literature being a collection of regional statements. This is, I know full well, the opposite of another well-known way of looking at literature, namely the idea of a canon, a list, a cluster, a sort of gentlepeople's club of great books. People whose judgement of books is aesthetic, or they believe it is, normally think in this way, judging books, eliminating or relegating most, allowing a selected few into an

inner sanctum. People of this sort allocate books a ranking, and they reserve a privileged place for those they think worthy. A large number of people think this way, even if only by default, whereas the opposite way of looking is closer to geographical than aesthetic. Regions, areas, locales, are expected to produce a literature focussed on what's special about their place. Any place worth knowing has its literature, its art, making it worthy of consideration – even a visit!

I imagine that these two ways of looking at books have their origins in two ways of looking at the world. Do we take ourselves as central, and concentrate on things that add quality to our vision, our way of seeing, or do we take ourselves largely for granted and focus on learning about the world around us? The former view, making the individual centrally important, calls for 'quality' and satisfaction; the latter view, more concerned with what's out there than with the central self, is prepared to pick up knowledge wherever it can be found. I find myself, when travelling in areas I want to know about and which haven't yet produced much by way of 'literature', buying roughly written memoirs or little histories by people who have no training because if I don't read these sources, there won't be any other, and because sometimes the writings of the unlettered tell readers things that they'll never get from specialists.

Sometimes, with this kind of writing, it's the things unsaid that are most eloquent. I've recently been reading *Seventeen Years Wandering among the Aborigines* by James Morill (actually Murrells), dated 1864 (2). The modern reader will find that what s/he most wants to be told isn't there. Readers of 1864 may have been

enthralled by accounts of ships crashing on rocks and parties of survivors finding their way across the ocean (and the Great Barrier Reef in this case) to shore, but when a white lad survives these early dangers and has seventeen years with the blacks, causing him to write with such sympathy and affection that you conjecture that he must have become one of the tribe in at least some shape or form, the silence, the barrier inside the writer's mind, is most frustrating. I am speaking of an insoluble problem. Writers address their readers, and James Morrill's readers would have been shocked to hear of a white man partnering black women, perhaps having children. Did this happen? Who can say? James Morrill doesn't, yet something about the way he speaks of his Townsville area people suggests to this reader that he was young and adaptable enough to join his rescuers as much as they were willing to accept him. How far was that? He probably didn't know himself, and he was certainly inhibited, on his return to white civilisation, about telling of his commitment to the blacks' way of living. So he said what he felt free to say, and it wasn't very much because most of what he had to tell them – and us, a century and a half later – fell in the area of things unsayable. We are left guessing. We can surmise, of course, but what we come up with is a modern fiction and can't be verified.

This brings us to the imagination's limits. People may have an array of feelings, experiences, reactions and ideas but if they don't write them down, they're lost. Intuition can only take us so far. People must be open enough to tell us what's in their minds, or we'll never know. Was Porter right to call Slessor a pilferer, taking

unwritten poems to the grave? Perhaps; we'll never know. Or was it that Slessor realised that once he passed a certain point there was nothing there? We'll never know, will we? We don't always get answers to our questions. I say the imagination has limits; perhaps 'limitations' would be a better word. Limitations, defects ... The imagination liberates, but it doesn't always know what it's doing. The imagination runs the risk of not knowing where it is, of forgetting the ground under its feet in favour of staring into space. And yet, as I've said several times, without our imaginations we're hardly alive, and the nation's literature is the life of its imagination. We have to deal with the things inside us, pressing on the linings that keep us together, functioning. Every one of the books discussed in these essays had to be written because something urgent pressed on a writer's mind. Literature, if seen completely in this way, would have to be an inner, a psychological, process – and it is. And yet, books are redolent of the places of their creation. I've criticised *Voss* for not being able to leave the world Patrick White knew, and I've praised Furphy's *Such Is Life* for restricting its field of action to the Riverina, which Furphy knew well. All writers' minds have limits, and these are linked with the areas they know and the forces and influences that anyone living in the area would be exposed to.

So it is not entirely unrealistic to think of literature as belonging to the region, the group of people, the place, where it was formed. I speak of something highly inexact, but substantial nonetheless. So where do we go from here?

The place to look, I think, is the boundary of the nation we are considering. This would seem easy to define, since it's an island

nation. Let the high-tide line be the boundary! The real boundary, however, is to be found inside the mind, and it's the place – the confusion, more probably – where the home-grown meets the globally shared. If we read accounts of the early settlement of New South Wales, we find that the whitefellas and the blackfellas were very curious about each other; curious – and scared. In those earliest days of contact, the numbers on both sides were small, but before too long more and more settlers – and convicts – arrived from England, and the black people's population declined from loss of land, disease, massacres, and – this mustn't be ignored – loss of heart. They could see that they were losing. The newcomers sought to settle a land they didn't understand. Certain things did well, others didn't. They fell on the trees with axes, they unleashed hard-hooved animals on the soil. They created an entirely different style of economy. They linked it to the world outside. They went exploring. New settlers kept arriving; they're coming still, today. What led to the almost-extirpation of the black people was the relentlessness of the invasion. It gave the black people little chance to regroup. Their way of life was so well-balanced that it could hardly recover from the disruption it experienced ...

What has this to do with our nation's literature? Quite a lot. Everything that takes place in our country takes place in a context of competing world-systems. Paradoxically, the stronger side, the nearly-always-winning side, has the weaker understanding of the land which is in dispute. The black people, in their fightback, have to convince the white people – who are endlessly reinforced in their ignorance by the ignorance of newly arriving migrants – that the

foundation of western capitalism – endless growth – is impossible, and dominance must give way to working within what's available. Globalisation will force this realisation on people eventually, but we are still a long way from general acceptance. The best ally the black people have in their recovery is the land they understood so well. It simply won't allow the European-American civilisation to do whatever it likes wherever it likes. Unfortunately, its lessons are taught in a way that's destructive; if irrigators take too much water for their own purposes, gum trees die downstream. Wetlands dry up ... and so on. This process of adaptation – the land to the purposes of the settlers, and the settlers to the land they're learning to use, and actually, and not surprisingly, to love – is going on all the time, and it's a little different from place to place, region to region. Australia is many places, and it's one. Its places are vastly different, and yet the struggle I've just described is common to all. Similar processes are going on everywhere, each happening in a local way. People's minds are everywhere engaged with the same issues, but the issues take different forms, according to whereabouts they're placed in the continua I mentioned, early on – north to south, east to west.

People live, they digest their experience, some of them put it into words. There are humble memoirs, scratchy letters, government or council reports ... and there are occasional works that set the imagination alight. 'Henry Handel Richardson, Eleanor Dark' ... what was it, again? ... 'the cavalcade is long, and stumbles by silhouetted against its own perpetual sunset ... leave gift-wrapped observations for the unborn to read.' The country's life is in its

literature, and its literature rises out of its life, if all's proceeding properly. Things are different from place to place, though, so we have to be travellers, wanderers, to know what our country has to say.

Start at the bottom: *For the Term of His Natural Life* takes us to Port Arthur prison settlement, a place remembered for its darker side, and not its more progressive – but that's an historian's argument, and readers of Marcus Clarke will know it his way. Price Warung gave us the dark side of convict life too, and not so much about prisoners who got pardons, or emancipation, married and had the early citizens of our land. I say 'the bottom'; I mean geographically, on the way to Antarctica ... but if I start chronologically, at the beginning of my own life, I remember the Riverina, and the belt of redgums following the Murray a little way to the south of our farm. I saw many sights which, reading *Such Is Life* several decades later, could be projected on a screen as a backdrop for the action. Tom Collins had told his story, and I didn't know about it – yet. I turned twelve, I went away to school in Melbourne. To this day, aged seventy six, I can remember waking in my dormitory that first morning, and seeing, out the window behind the opposite row of beds, a house the likes of which I'd never seen. Storks made of stone paraded its parapets. The thing stood high, as no dwelling in the Riverina stood. 'What's that?' I asked. Nobody knew. They were new kids, like me. In the months that followed I got opportunities to look at the strange house, standing in Labassa Grove, Caulfield. Aha! Now you know its name. It had been built with goldrush money, elaborately as possible, in the way of the late

nineteenth century, by people about whom I knew nothing. Time passed, in the way it has of doing – in the way that brought me across the years between seeing Talbingo for the first time, driving home to the Riverina from a visit to the Snowy Mountains hydro-electric scheme, to reading in a book that Miles Franklin had stayed with her grandmother at that very spot, and had loved it ever after – years passed, and I read the poetry of Kenneth Slessor:

I thought of what you'd written in faint ink,
Your journal with the sawn-off lock, that stayed behind
With other things you left, all without use,
All without meaning now, except a sign
That someone had been living who now was dead:
"At Labassa. Room 6 x 8
On top of the tower; because of this, very dark
And cold in winter. Everything has been stowed
Into this room – 500 books all shapes
And colours, dealt across the floor
And over sills and on the laps of chairs;
Guns, photos of many different things
And different curios that I obtained ..."

Joe Lynch had lived in the tower room of the house that I saw, that first morning of my six years at boarding school, and something like twenty years had to pass before I discovered this, and felt that it had meaning for me. What meaning, you may ask, for we all know that when we are excited by some discovery other people merely comment, 'So what?'

So what if Joe Lynch had lived for a while in the tower room of a quaint house that's stuck in my mind because I first saw it when

my young life encountered a dislocation? Does that bring Joe, or Slessor, any closer to me, and what does it matter if it did?

What does it matter, indeed? I find it matters terribly to me, as if a cloud had lowered itself to tell me that my life would change by its words. I've used the word 'imagination' a lot in this essay; let me switch to 'illumination'. Poetry, when it's working well, sends shafts of light into our minds. It causes us to see things differently. It brings us into touch with a numinous world that we know surrounds us, almost all the time, but makes itself felt – or visible – only occasionally. Each of these experiences tells us that things are not quite as we'd previously understood them – there's another layer there, connections we hadn't had made for us, until we realised ...

Realised what?

Consciousness is always trying to enlarge itself for our benefit. We have limited minds, limited capacity to deal with perceptions when they arrive. We need to know more than we will ever know. We invent the idea of god to cope with our shortcomings. Knowing as little as we do, and understanding less, we're reassured by the idea of a transcendent intelligence out there, understanding all the things we can't understand and untroubled by the questions we can't answer for ourselves. The idea of god is a comfort! But as we grow up we realise that it's a walking stick and we become too proud to use it. Brave souls, we are! But we stumble from time to time, and doubt if we're as sure-footed as we need to be. Our doubts are well-placed: we aren't. We look around, and we're grateful for the insights of our poets, our artists, composers and

writers because they give us at least something of what we want to know. Troubled by the death of Joe, Slessor asked himself:

Where have you gone? The tide is over you,
The turn of midnight water's over you,
As Time is over you, and mystery,
And memory, the flood that does not flow.
You have no suburb, like those easier dead
In private berths of dissolution laid –
The tide goes over, the waves ride over you
And let their shadows down like shining hair,
But they are Water; and the sea-pinks bend
Like lilies in your teeth, but they are Weed;
And you are only part of an Idea.

Slessor goes on, doing his best to work it out, finding the limits of his poetry as he finds the limits of his mind, and, in finishing his poem, accepting that he will, before too long, finish writing poetry because it can only take him so far, and he wants to go further but knows, having questioned the absence of Joe, that it's simply not in him to get any further than he has in his great poem. I count it a privilege to have been brought a tiny bit closer to Slessor's poem by reason of knowing that house, that tower room where Joe lived for a while, so that I have a step, an open door, into 'Five Bells', and can travel with the poet fractionally more easily as we bring ourselves to face those ever so final words, five bells. They are the end of everything, or so we say, but things go on, forever surrounding us, and when we consider our imaginative lives, it is a help if we can find steps of entry, open doors, between the world around us we know well and the world of illumination which writers open for us,

every once in a while. Writers need help, and all our little tricks, to get ourselves from one world to the other. Readers need help too, and the regional references in a piece of writing – the things that can cause a reader to step back and say, ‘Oh yes, I’ve been there’ or ‘I’ve seen that place at the very same time of day!’ – are a help, an encouragement, to help us take the imaginative steps we need to take to share the illumination that good writing can bring.

1. ‘Hal Porter’s Australia: South Gippsland and its towns’, illustrated and written by Hal Porter, in *Australian Letters*, Vol 6, Nos 3-4, Adelaide, September 1964
2. Republished by David M Welch, Box 503, CMB 19, Virginia, Northern Territory 0822 in 2006 as No. 1 in *Australian Aboriginal Culture Series*; the full title in 1864 was ‘Sketch of a residence among the aboriginals of Northern Queensland for seventeen years, being a narrative of my life, shipwreck, landing, on the coast, residence among the aboriginals, with an account of their manners and customs, and mode of living. Together with notices of many of the natural productions, and of the nature of the country’.