

## AUSTRALIAN STUDIES ABROAD - INDIA AND EUROPE

John McLaren

In this paper, I wish to make three assertions and put an argument. The assertions are that Australian studies are alive and well in India and in a number of European countries; that the interest of people abroad in Australia is intrinsic and potentially lasting; and that there are nevertheless some reasons to worry about the future of these studies. The argument is that it is important for us to support Australian studies abroad because these studies promote a better understanding of Australia in the world at large, help us to understand ourselves better, and make a specific and important contribution to the present state of human knowledge.

The assertions can be made simply. During my six months of study leave I was able to lecture to groups interested in Australian studies in two centres in India, five in Italy, and one each in Yugoslavia, Germany and Denmark, as well as talking with scholars in various other places in these countries. In most cases the Australian studies were concentrated on literature, which was valued <sup>for</sup> providing both a form of comparison with local and other English literatures and as a means of learning about Australian culture and society. In all of these places there was an interest in Australia which had been built up over the years by repeated visits, official and unofficial, from Australian academics and writers. Among the students I worked

with over some months in Venice, there was an interest in Australia partly because of ties developed through immigration, but also because of a perception, sometimes ill-informed, of Australia as a new frontier culturally as well as socially or economically. Yet this interest is tempered by the difficulty of obtaining satisfactory texts for study, and is jeopardised by competition from the vigorous sponsorship of their own cultures by countries like Canada and even New Zealand. The momentum built up through the efforts of academics, writers and diplomats could easily falter unless it receives further support from governments and industry.

One resource abroad which can easily be ignored is the opportunity for comparative studies made available in collections in which the Australian content may be only peripheral or incidental. Professor C.D.Narasimhaiah's library at the Literary Criterion Centre in Dhvanyaloka, Mysore, offers a venue for systematic studies in commonwealth literatures, and the library at the Central Institute for English and Foreign Languages in Hyderabad provides an opportunity for comparative cultural and linguistic studies. Apart from a reasonable, but by no means comprehensive, collection of Commonwealth literature, this library holds some 250 Ph.D. theses ranging from highly technical topics of semantics and phonology to pedagogical investigations of the relationships between the mother tongue and the ability to learn second and further languages through to issues of purely literary theory. These all have potential value for linguistic

and educational studies of Australia as a multicultural society. The value of the collection would however be enhanced by supplementing it with a carefully chosen selection of Australian writing relevant to literary cultural studies.

The High Commission in Delhi also represents a lost opportunity to provide a basis for Australian studies in India. The Commission houses a useful core of books dealing with Australia, but the collection has not been kept up to date or developed systematically, and has only a part-time official in charge of it. Her enthusiasm ensures that it is used to the best advantage, but her efforts deserve professional support.

The situation in India is parallel to that in Europe. The embassies do what they can, and where there are staff with both personal commitment and official responsibility the support for Australian studies has achieved valuable results. The past successes in Italy owe a great deal not only to Bernard Hickey and, through him to the Italian Society for Australian Studies, but also to the support over the years of senior embassy staff and several ambassadors. The recent formation of an Australian Studies association in West Germany reflects both the enthusiasm of Professor Horst Priessnitz at the University of Wupertal and the support of the Embassy in Bonn, where Stephanie Shwabsky has been able to provide the necessary organisation and contacts. However, these successes are the result of particular enthusiasms rather than of a sustained policy, and are subject to changes in staff and fluctuations in official priorities.

In the current climate of economic stringency it may, of course, be argued that Australian studies are fortunate to receive any official support, and that our foreign representatives must continue to give the highest priority to our material interests. This argument however overlooks the fact that culture itself has a material aspect, if not base, and that the kind of understanding and interest which is cultivated through Australian studies can provide immediate material benefits both by stimulating the export of Australian books and other cultural goods and by creating a better climate for the acceptance of other Australian exports.

In this regard we should note that the bookselling and publishing industry is an important part of the Australian economy. Historically, we have depended on overseas publishers for most of our reading matter, and have exported very little of our own. During the last three decades, however, the proportion of imports to sales has fallen from 80% to just over half. In the same period, total retail sales have risen from one million pounds in 1958 to over \$700 million in the fiscal year of 1985. During these years however exports of books and rights have risen in value only from L78 000 to \$21 million. This represents a decline from one third to one-twentieth in the proportionate value of Australian books exported to that of domestic sales. Although this is a useful sum it leaves plenty of opportunity for improving the balance. (ABPA Statistics, September 1986; Fabinyi, Meanjin, vol. XI, no.1, 1951, pp.667-70; vol.XII, no.3, 1958,

pp.312-318). Vigorous action by both governments and publishers is needed if this domestic flourishing of Australian publishing and writing is to be complemented by exports. The encouragement of Australian studies can play a small but real part in bringing about such an expansion.

A prior condition of any expansion of Australian studies is, however, access to Australian books. The programs conducted by Foreign Affairs and the Literature Board to provide journals and selected books to centres of Australian studies in Italy and other European countries are very useful, and I understand that they are to be supplemented by the development of lists of Australian texts which could provide the core of Australian studies collections at various levels of complexity. The potential of such programs cannot however be realised while academics have difficulty either in ordering further books for their libraries or in prescribing them for their students. Even in India, where there are branches of most of the multinationals who publish in Australia, it is difficult or impossible to obtain many Australian titles. In Italy it is rarely possible to purchase Australian books locally, and Australian retailers who supply books by mail-order have great difficulty in coping with the audit and payment requirements of Italian universities. Similarly, English firms do not seem to be geared to the European market. The only solution to this problem would seem to be the establishment of both a retail bookshop specialising in Australian books at least to European universities, and of a distribution agency able to promote and supply Australian titles

to foreign-language bookshops in Europe. In the long run, such ventures should pay their own way and at the same time open further markets for Australian products.

However, I do not believe that we should put undue emphasis on material benefits that might flow from the development of Australian studies abroad, nor delude ourselves that there is any great untapped market just waiting for the promotion of Australian books and other cultural goods. The first reason for cultivating Australian studies abroad, and particularly in Europe, is merely to strengthen the cultural links already established through migration and to make ourselves better understood in countries which still play an important part in our military, political and ultimately social destiny. We may have come a long way since 1952, when Lewis Milestone could make a supposedly Australian film, Kangaroo, which showed apparently desperate Aborigines waiting a station-owner's permission before drinking his bore-water, and was advertised in New York and London by inviting patrons to "See Wild Aborigines of Australia Dance Blood-curdling Corroborree. See animals extinct everywhere else for 60 000 000 years. See Land that Time Forgot . . . See Man Battle Beast Across Wall of Fire For Last Well of Water" (Bruce Grant, Meanjin, vol.XI, no 4, 1952, pp.411-413). Nevertheless, in Italy at least the television screening of The Thornbirds was a popular success and for many students was the definitive account of life in Australia. Such Hollywood romanticising merely perpetuates a frontier myth which obscures

the realities of contemporary Australia and prevents us being taken seriously as a part of the western industrial world.

As Italian students repeatedly pointed out to me, their country is among the world's top ten in industrial production and commercial strength. Because it has in effect never been an imperial power it enjoys open relations with the third world. Despite economic problems, it now enjoys higher average living standards than Britain and better social services than Australia. It has a civil service which has given it stability despite an apparently fragile political system, it has survived terrorist campaigns from right and left, and it now seems to be getting the better of the Mafia, thanks to some extremely courageous public officials. There is much for us to learn from its social and political diversity, yet behind this diversity there is still a failure to achieve a cultural unity to match its national unity. As a consequence, Italian students are interested as much in Australia's political institutions as in its arts and literature. While in West Germany the Australian studies association seems to have brought together people with interests in the social sciences as well as in literature and the arts, the Italian association seems to be mainly, although not exclusively, interested in literature. However, the literature is studied in a social context, and the very difference of the texts confronts the students with the sheer fact of a physical environment which conditions the social and human issues they explore. Even although Italian students brought up in an existentialist literary tradition seem to be able to deal with a work like

Furphy's Such Is Life better than their urban Australian counterparts, they first have to unravel its thematic and linguistic entanglement with the vast landscapes of the Riverina. Similarly, although the ostensible politics of so urban and suburban a writer as John Morrison are familiar to European students, these cannot be detached from their distinctive social environment with its contradictory male and female ethos. Even the most literary study therefore becomes inevitably a study of society, and thus furthers a comparative understanding of what the two societies have in common as well as of where they differ.

The need to explain to foreign students the local context of our literature indicates the second major reason for cultivating Australian studies abroad - its value in helping us understand ourselves as a multicultural society derived mainly from European origins. This understanding is furthered as, through the process of teaching, we also come to perceive the differences in what may easily appear common traditions. The intellectual tradition from which we have sprung is still vividly represented in English departments in Indian universities, where English literature remains the writing of English writers. Yet the people I met - academics and professionals rather than undergraduates - saw Australia both as still shackled to our colonial past, without enough confidence to rid ourselves of such embarrassing relics as the Queen and the Union Jack, and as providing a literature which interpreted the expansion of Europe and, in the work of writers like Patrick White and A.D.Hope,



helped to emancipate the language from English precedent. Australians can find the same sense of emancipation through comparative study of Indian writing in English.

The students in Venice, on the other hand, shared the same outlook, the same attitudes, the same values, even the same dress as those in Footscray. But beyond this commonality in the present there was a different sense of both past and future. Essentially, the Italian students I spoke to felt bound by a past that denied them a future, and they envied an Australia which they felt was free from the oppression of the one and therefore offered hope for the other. Yet their immediate engagement in one of the arenas of great power conflict gave them, I felt, a more realistic understanding of the world than their Australian cousins have. Because they were tired of politics they were prepared to see the world in immediate personal terms, rather than through glasses tinted by ideological commitment or cultural struggle. Thus, although they may have harboured romantic views about Australia in general, they tended to see our writing more starkly, and by showing me where it was not European - or, in the case of Furphy, where it was - they helped me to understand more clearly what differentiates Australia from its European origins.

This brings me to the third, and in my opinion most important, reason for encouraging the development of Australian studies abroad - Australia as a metaphor of European experience. It is currently fashionable to refer to Australia as

a part of Asia, or, among those with a better historical sense, as a European outpost on the fringes of Asia. These images however ignore the fact that the process of expansion and colonisation from Europe has unified the world within a single economic and, increasingly, cultural framework. As Peter Worsley has pointed out (The Three Worlds: culture and world development, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London, 1984), the world is irrevocably committed to an urban and industrial future. Worsley further argues that the shape of this future will be determined not only by the struggle between classes and nations to appropriate land and surplus value, but also by the clash of cultures and values. Australia as a society has been shaped by this clash. Australia is both the frontier to which the European peasantry fled or were driven to make way for industry and the source of the cheap primary produce which supported the industrial conurbations of the old world. It is also the world's first urban society, with the majority of the population living in cities since early in the nineteenth century. If the American societies are the first products, and African the first victims, of European colonial expansion, Australia is in a real sense the first product of Europe's industrial revolution. The continuing influx of migrants, particularly from peasant communities around the Mediterranean and south Asia, keeps Australia at the frontier of urban explosion at the same time that its industrial decline represents one of the possible futures for Europe and North America. We may have escaped the wretchedness which marks urban growth in India or South America, but even in a time of economic

decline we represent a crucible of experiment within which the European experience is tested, for survival now as it was for reform in the last century.

While overseas interest in Australia may be stimulated by its perceived exotic quality or its apparent resources of hope, the potential value of this interest lies in Australia as a case where the nature of European experience may be examined. The results of this examination may yield lessons about the design of our global future, but at the most modest level they must help us to understand ourselves better and thus find a surer place for ourselves in that uncertain future. If for no other reason, this is a sufficient justification for encouraging other countries to join us in the pursuit of Australian studies.

In conclusion, I would like to take one theme which emerged during my teaching in Italy as an example of the way Australian studies can illuminate both societies. Laurie Hergenham and Graham Turner have both, in recent publications, reminded us of the importance of imprisonment and enclosure in Australian narratives from Marcus Clarke through Henry Handel Richardson to Thomas Keneally. The sense as well as the fact of imprisonment in the works of these authors is created both by the social institutions derived from the old world and by the hostile and unyielding natural environment. Clarke's image of the convict as victim owes much to Hugo and Dumas, but the natural prison in which soldiers and convicts alike are held both bonds them together and emphasises injustice as an absolute at the

heart of the system in a way not to be paralleled in European writing until Solzhenitsyn. The fact that convicts and gaolers are caught in the same trap reveals the power of the one group over the other as an affront to humanity. The frontier judges and condemns the metropolis for the injustice it finds at its heart.

In The Fortunes of Richard Mahony, Henry Handel Richardson traces a more complex pattern of affirmation and rejection. Mahony is trapped by the system he brings with him, in the form of his own prejudices, and finds already here in the naked greed with which his neighbours rape the rich earth. In the end, his spirit finds reconciliation only in death. In Keneally's work, however, as in Patrick White's, the outcasts of European society find peace by embracing, often literally, the land and the isolation it symbolizes. Only thus can they purge themselves of the guilts which otherwise taint their attempts to build a new society. In the novels of David Malouf, a major European Australian writer, this natural reconciliation is brought back into the cities themselves, as new world and old are united in an affirmation which is at the same time a denial of one of the central tenets of European civilization, the creating and self-sufficient individual. In this self-denying affirmation the Australain makes that declaration of independence which can be fully understood only in relation to the land as frontier of Europe.

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