

Jaydeep Sarangi and Bisnod Mishra, eds. 2006: *Explorations in Australian Literature*. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons. xvi +202 pp. ISBN: 81-7625-709-5

Eroulla Demetriou  
Universidad de Jaén  
eroulla@ujaen.es

Traditionally Australian literature has been considered as little else than a little sister to British and American literatures, a literary sibling who has only recently come of age and therefore hardly deserved to be closely read and even considered as an independent relative. Indeed, up to 1898, when Henry Gyles Turner and Alexander Sutherland published *The Development of Australian Literature*, a first serious attempt to systematise the literature from down under, Australian literature was still virtually unthought-of in the books of any literary critic. Moreover, this has almost been the case up to only a few decades ago. Australian literature had not managed to attract much attention either until some meritorious handbooks saw the light in the second half of the 20th century, notably *A History of Australian Literature Pure and Applied* (1961), by H. M. Green; *The Literature of Australia* (1964 and 1976), by Geoffrey Dutton; *The Oxford History of Australian Literature* (1981), edited by Leonie Kramer; *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia* (1988), edited by Laurie Hergenhan; and *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature* (2000), by Elizabeth Webby, to name but a few of the best known. Scholars' increasing interest in postcolonial studies during recent decades has encouraged the publication of new works on Australian literature and other English-speaking national literatures.

So far, most analyses of Australian literature –quite numerous of late – have been carried out by Australian scholars and university lecturers, who are only naturally concerned about studying and dissecting their own literary production and constructing a canon. It was only fairly recently, in 1963, that a first professorship of Australian literature was created at Sydney University and only a handful of Australian scholars have made it possible since then to maintain an interest in pro-Australian literary studies. But apart from local literary critics, Australian literature had not managed to attract much interest internationally until 1973, when Patrick White became the first Australian writer to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Therefore, it is in my opinion one of the main merits of Jaydeep Sarangi and Binod Mishra, editors of the recent book *Explorations in Australian Literature* (2006), to have made sure that most of its contributors are non-Australians: in fact, most of them are Indian, followed in number by three lecturers working at Australian universities and two more working at Spanish universities. This circumstance of international pre-eminence of non-Australian contributors grants the book a completely new perspective: the idea intended to be conveyed with this new publication is that Australian literature has reached a degree of maturity, meaning that it is also worth studying by non-Australians. Furthermore, as far as Indian scholars are concerned, it is clear that nowadays there is a clear interest among them in paying due attention to different

aspects of Australian literature. In her foreword Margaret Allen (U. of Adelaide) declares how pleasantly surprised she is to verify the interest that Indian universities have lately granted to studying Australian aspects of her culture and literature (vi).

No matter how far Australia may be linked in spirit to Britain, in recent times she cannot but look to the Asian-Pacific region for political and cultural support. The relationship Asia-Australia is reciprocal. Indeed, proof of the recent interest of Indian (and other non-Australian) critics in the literature written and published down under is *Explorations in Australian Literature*. This book consists of a collection of selected essays written by eighteen specialists on contemporary Australian literature. The wide number of contributors goes hand in hand with the great variety of approaches presented in the book, a fact that seems to run parallel to the country's multicultural and multiethnic reality. However, this book goes a step further in the 'exploration' of the most recent literature written by Australians. The main Anglophone literatures (British, American and to some extent Canadian) have already established a canon; Australian literature is on the way to doing so; and this book is evidence of this. Australian writers and literary critics are in the midst of a strenuous process of 'glocalization' of Australian literature within a massively unstoppable and unavoidable globalised world. In other words, they are searching for a specific literary identity within a globalised concept of the literary phenomenon, an identity which differentiates them from the heavy cultural and political influence of the ex-metropolis. Could this book be interpreted as a testimony of this struggle for un-globalization of Australian literature?

The eighteen chapters of *Explorations in Australian Literature* are preceded by a Foreword, a Preface and Notes on Contributors. The chapters themselves, of varying lengths, are not placed in any easily perceived order, as it is neither chronological, nor alphabetical, nor thematic. They may appear to give the reader the impression of dispersion. However, as one begins to read the different chapters, one perceives that they can be classified into two groups: those that deal with individual authors and their works and those that approach a specific issue or trait of 'Australianness'. In the first group we find articles on key 20th-century Australian writers reflecting Australian literary diversity such as Sally Morgan, Roberta Sykes (both of them studied by Elena Oliete), Murray Bail (by R. C. Sheila Royappa), Dorothy Porter (by Paul Sharrad), Fredy Neptune (by Pradip Trikha), Peter Carey (by Prashant Gupta and Sukhpreet Kahlon), Yasmine Gooneratne and Mena Abdullah (by Pradip Kumar Patra), Judith Wright (by Nandini Sahu), Patrick White (the only protagonist of two articles written by Ashok Kumar and by Kalpana Purohit), David Malouf (by Sriparna Dutta) and Les A. Murray (by Anurag Sharma). On the other hand, specific features of the two centuries of Australian writing dealt with in Dr Sarangi and Dr Mishra's book are the following: Australian's moral relativism (by Dennis Haskell), the refraction principle inherent in Australian literary works (by José Carlos Redondo Olmedilla), the issue of frontier history in Australian theatre (by C. Kodhandaraman), the concept of memory and place in Australian works (by S. Musali), the perception of Australian poetry by readers from other ex-British colonies such as Indian university students (by Malati Mathur), its multiculturalism (by Susan Cowan), aboriginal story-telling and the role of the family in its oral transmission (by Nalini G. Kapoor), among others. Today's

relevance of women writers on the Australian literary scene is well represented in Sarangi and Mishra's book. Out of twelve writers analysed, six are women.

In addition to its preliminary pages, the book has been provided with a short index of names and main issues of Australian interest (198-202). However, alas, we find that some of the entries may be more misleading than useful: in between the names of Australian keynote writers we find terms such as *American polities* (should read *American politics*), *Australian magia* (repeated twice and nonexistent on page 55, where the index says it should appear), *Hind against Mussulman* (in any case, *Hindu*), *King Lear* (in the text where the term comes up, the context is the following: "Ellen is a female King Lear"), *Magpie* (201) (the name of a poem by Dorothy Porter, but not indicated as such), *President of Good and Evil* (201) (this is the name given to President George W. Bush by Peter Singer), *Ufo* (202) (another poem by Porter), *Union of Soviet Socialist Republican* (202) (no comment), *United States* (202) and *United States of America* (202). Unfortunately, the index cannot but convey some sense of unreliability and the reader may feel rightly compelled to steer clear of it.

Although the fairly high number of chapters in the book may indeed be an asset for the confirmed scholar who wishes to be exposed to the different literary and 'exploratory' points of view by which the Australian literary phenomenon may be approached nowadays, it is also true that it may be discouraging for any literary reviewer for the obvious lack of space at his/her disposal. The chapters of this work effectively portray what is typical of Australian literature, paying detailed attention to landscapes of Australia (Royappa and Murali), its aboriginal population and literature (Kodhandaraman and Sahu), the question of multiculturalism (Kumar Patra and Malouf), its distinctive colloquial language (Triksa) and the history of this nation through its colonisers (Gupta and Kodhandaraman). Although some of these chapters are rather short, they contribute to the overall effect of giving an Australian distinctiveness to the whole. Nevertheless, if I were to pinpoint a few of these eighteen chapters that may be of more methodological interest for both the newcomer to Australian literature and the confirmed specialist, I would choose the Preface, written by the editors, and the chapters written by Elena Oliete ('Voicing Historical Silences in Sally Morgan's *My Place* and Roberta Sykes' *Trilogy Snake Dreaming: A Journey from the Margins to the Centre Through Two Different Paths*'), José Carlos Redondo Olmedilla ('Mapping Australian Literature: The Refraction Principle'), Malati Mathur ('Australian Poetry in the Indian Classroom'), Ashok Kumar ('Patrick White's Contribution to Australian Literature: a Tribute to the Nobel Laureate'), Nalini G. Kapoor ('Family – The Site of Story-telling in Aboriginal Women's Writing') and Anurag Sharma ('The Realization of *Kaivalya* in the Poetry of Les A. Murray: an Indian Perspective'). Comprising seven chapters altogether, nearly half the book, they are enough, I believe, to give the interested reader a clear picture of the spirit of the book. They are chosen for discussion because they are distinguished by the fact that rather than just concentrating on Australian typicality and identity, they offer real 'explorations', as the title suggests, into innovative ways of studying this country's literature.

Needless to say, the Preface introduces the two main aims of this “anthology of essays”, as the editors put it: on the one hand, “to make the Australian literature more familiar in present day situations” (viii). The editors wish to grant special relevance to the incidence that Australian literature is currently enjoying in the academic curricula of Indian universities and colleges, a fact which justifies the compilation of this book. On the other hand, they endeavour to attract the literary critics’ attention towards the role that the Asian community in Australia is playing, as a result of the Indian diaspora, on the multicultural/multiethnic nature of Australia. After all, they conclude, “A settler colony is a space to reconcile indigenous and settler population” (viii).

The originality of Ms Oliete’s essay (one of the most elaborate of the book) lies in the fact that she employs the autobiographies of two contemporary non-white women – Sally Morgan and Roberta Sykes- to demonstrate that, though written under the influence of similar background and life circumstances with the same purpose in mind (that is, to endeavour to escape from the Australian fringe), the perspectives of the same topic may differ greatly, and indeed they do, but the morale is the same. She uses the works of two black aboriginal authoresses to depict the hardships that they had to endure and at the same time denounces the painful silence/marginality/exclusion (in too many cases synonymous terms) that was ‘officially’ imposed on the non-white male and especially on the female population of Australia by men, white men and British white men. Ms Oliete’s intention in this chapter is therefore threefold.

Dr Redondo Olmedilla’s main merit is that he employs –as far as I know, for the first time in Australian literary criticism, a fact that adds to its originality – the principle of refraction to explain how the main constituents that have shaped Australian society and culture (land, isolation, distance and climate and the environment) have been transformed from their originally British conceptions as if they had been sieved through a cultural and literary filter. According to him, when English literature touches Australian ground, it becomes distorted, it changes, it assumes new shades. His chapter also serves to delimit the borderlines of the literature at the other end of the world.

Dr Mathur explains with evident didactic skill how easy his (Indian) university students find it to understand and interpret Australian literature. His ‘method’ is simple but effective: by appealing to the fact that both peoples, Australian and Indian alike, feel as if they are on the same wavelength, both having suffered the heavy burden of British imperialism and colonialism. This is a most daring and didactically innovative way of making his students interested in reading a foreign (although in the end not so foreign) national literary production, which is no small deal in today’s mass media age.

Dr Kumar analyses in depth the literary career of one of the leading Australian writers of today, the only Australian writer so far who has reached the Olympus of universal literary recognition: Patrick White. The scholar’s main contribution lies in his insistence on presenting White’s fiction as an unorthodox pot where the latter mixes traditional Christian and Dantean issues with mysticism and Aboriginal mythological beliefs, emphasising the un-Australian aspects of his Australianness.

In Kapoor’s chapter he concentrates on the key role of the family in Aboriginal women’s writing (oral folklore, autobiographies, biographies and family histories) as

the main transmitter of genuine Australianness. Its previously unwritten nature during the British domination makes it all the more interesting as it represents the way the Aboriginal 'underground' culture and heritage has survived throughout its years of anonymity in spite of the efforts made by the political and male powers that be of the metropolis to annul it and relegate it to the lowest profile possible. In the last two centuries, female Aboriginal literature has successfully contributed to constructing yet one more feature of Australian identity and this is effectively explained by Dr Kapoor.

Dr. Sharma uses *kaivalya* (a Sanskrit term meaning isolation, self-realization, the final separation of the self from matter) to explain the poetic work of one of today's best known Australian poets, Les A. Murray. Sharma's originality lies in his attempt to justify the poet's declared interest in integrations, in convergences, from a fully Indian perspective. As Sharman's chapter constitutes the last of Sarangi and Mishra's collection, the reader closes the book savouring the idea of the universal vocation of Australian literature in general and Murray's verse in particular.

By having chosen only seven of the chapters I do not intend to nullify the merit of the others. Sarangi and Mishra's book is both honest and audacious as it allows the presentation of a wide range of perspectives, some obviously more fortunate than others, but nevertheless indicative and revealing enough of the kaleidoscopic nature of Australian literature during the 20th century and the early years of the 21st. One of the editors' biggest merits, in my opinion, is to have been able to collect a group of essays that clearly depict this. There is, however, a slight blemish in the book, and this is the impression of lack of care in revising the texts that the book sometimes cannot help conveying, for there are some minor slips of the pen that could have been avoided had a more careful correction of the proofs been carried out. In spite of this, I must congratulate both the editors and the book's contributors for their successful, inspiring and inspired presentation of the latest routes taken by experts of Australian literature in their attempt to analyse and define one of the newest but most interesting English-speaking literatures written today. The editors admit that their book is not definitive. Indeed, its very title implies its exploratory and tentative nature. Both the editors and contributors' unstated aim seems to be, like that of many other pro-Australian handbooks, to find and explain the essence of Australian writing. Yet they do this by trial and error, by searching for Australian and un-Australian traits, by applying a non-Australian lens, which can be seen in the fact that there is such a large number of Indian critics and scholars who have contributed. However, I believe that from now on, whenever any expert wishes to work on Australianness, *Explorations in Australian Literature* will be included in the list of recommended reading. It is fit for explorers.

#### Works Cited

- Dutton, Geoffrey 1964: *The Literature of Australia*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.  
 ——— 1976: *The Literature of Australia*. London: Pelham Books.  
 Green, Henry Mackenzie 1961: *A History of Australian Literature Pure and Applied*. 2 vols. Sydney: Angus & Robertson.  
 Hergenhan, Laurie, ed. 1988: *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia*. Ringwood: Penguin.  
 Kramer, Leonie, ed. 1981: *The Oxford History of Australian Literature*. Melbourne: Oxford UP.

- Turner, Gyles Henry and Alexander Sutherland 1898: *The Development of Australian Literature*. London: Longmans, Green and Co.
- Webby, Elizabeth 2000: *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Received 7 June 2007  
Accepted 10 April 2008