

FIFTY YEARS OF

Australian Literary Studies

» PHILIP MEAD



In 2013 the scholarly journal *Australian Literary Studies* reached fifty years of publication. At the University of Queensland, in November, at the celebration to mark this notable achievement, Michael Wilding spoke about the history of the journal, emphasising its role as the first ‘fully professional’ journal of Australian literature. Over the years since the journal was founded commentary and scholarship about Australian literature by ‘non-professionals’ like ‘journalists, clergymen, printers and writers’ and by independent scholars like A. A. Phillips or Nettie Palmer, has gradually given way to the work of professional (that is university or university-affiliated) critics, editors, literary historians and biographers.¹ *ALS*, as everyone knows it, has been a dynamic centre of activity within that cultural development. Wilding also admitted that he may have been attracted to buying the first issue in a bookshop by Leonie Kramer’s article on Adam Lindsay Gordon, who had gone to the same school as him.

The first issue opened with J. C. Horner’s defence of Henry Kingsley’s genially imperialist romance *The Recollections of Geoffry Hamlyn* (1859). As well as Kramer’s article, it also included H. P. Heseltine’s study of J. Le Gay Brereton and A. G. Stephens’s *Bulletin*, Ellen Malos’s article on themes in Katharine Susannah Prichard’s fiction, as well as notes,

documents and reviews of Judith Wright’s stories, of Rawlings’ biography of Charles Harpur (by A. D. Hope), of Hadgraft’s scholarly edition of the ‘plausible liar’ Henry Savery’s convict narrative *Quintus Servinton* (by Brian Elliott), and of a comparative study of nineteenth-century Australian and Canadian poetry. The serious infrastructural intentions of the journal are signalled in founding editor Laurie Hergenhan’s brief note on the final page about the publication of an annotated bibliography of Bernard O’Dowd, No. 12 in Walter Stone’s series *Studies in Australian Bibliography*. This item presages what would become a core contribution of the journal to the development of professional literary studies in Australia, its ‘Annual Bibliography of Studies in Australian Literature’ (from 1964). The bibliography was an important forerunner of the comprehensive, online *AustLit* Resource (from 2002). The dearness of this aspect of *ALS* to Hergenhan’s editorial heart is obvious from his account of the role of bibliography and book history in his 2013 memoir: ‘[Stone’s series] served as a reminder that amateurs and enthusiasts like Stone, book collectors, printers and antiquarians had helped to keep Australian literature alive at a time when it was neglected by the academy.’² *ALS*, as Hergenhan recounts, ‘was intended as a journal not only of literary criticism but of *information*’.³ I don’t know if

(background)

An appreciative audience at the *ALS* 50th celebration.

PHOTO: ANDREW YEO FOR THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND LIBRARY

(left inset)

Editor Leigh Dale speaking at the 50th celebration.

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(right inset)

Laurie Hergenhan AO FAHA cutting the 50th anniversary cake.

PHOTO: ANDREW YEO FOR THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND LIBRARY

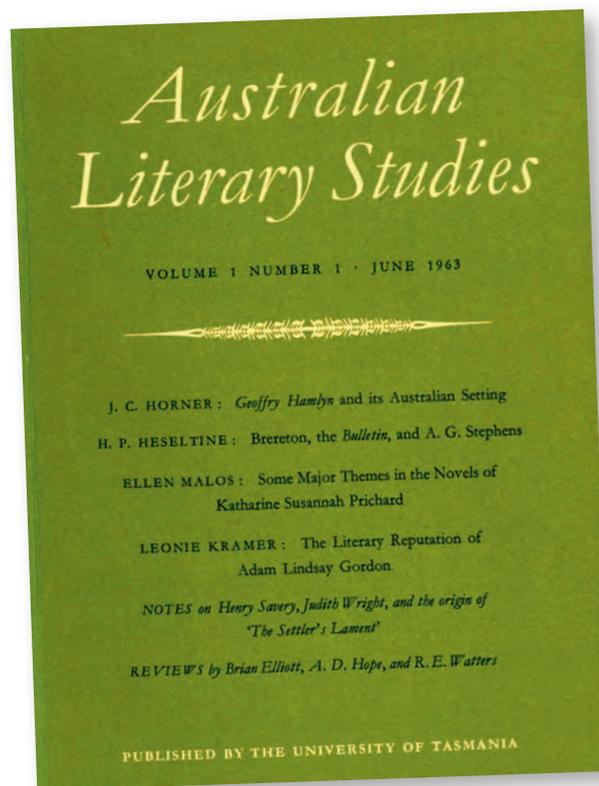
Hergenhan deliberately designed it that way but the cover livery of the first issue is a version of the 'national' colours, with print in the serene yellow of desert ruins, against a background of drab field-uniform green.

ALS began at the University of Tasmania in 1963, when that university was a dynamic and productive locus of studies in Australian literature, past and present. E. Morris Miller had published his bibliography *Australian Literature from its Beginnings* in 1940 and his *Pressmen and Governors: Australian Editors and Writers in Early Tasmania* in 1952. Laurie Hergenhan was a Lecturer in the English Department. A Sydney and London trained Victorianist, he was then embarking on authoritative critical studies of convict fiction. In his memoir in *ALS's '50 Years of Publication'* issue Hergenhan gives an account of the beginnings of the journal, the 'brain child' of 'two poets and professors, James McAuley and his friend Alec Hope'.⁴ Its first editorial committee included the then University of Tasmania librarian, bibliographer and print historian D. H. Borchardt, McAuley (recently appointed Professor of English), librarian, ex-Vice Chancellor and Professor of Philosophy and Psychology E. Morris Miller, Michael Roe from the History Department and Edward Stokes from English. McAuley had co-founded the polemical *Quadrant* in 1956; Borchardt, also a discipline-builder, would found the scholarly journal *Australian Academic and Research Libraries*, in 1970. A revealing aspect of *ALS's* inception was A. D. Hope's attraction to a North American model of professionalisation

in university humanist studies. As Hergenhan recalls, Hope had visited the United States in 1958 as a Carnegie Fellow to study the university teaching of its literature as providing a guide to what might be done in Australia. In celebrating twenty years of *ALS*, Hope repeated what he had said at its launch, that the pioneering academic journal *American Studies* (dating from the 1920s) seemed to him to foreshadow a possible role for an Australian

academic journal in 'providing a centre for the exchange of views and information, a forum for scholarship in the field [...] a record of historical and bibliographical reference'.⁵

That opening article of Horner's about *Geoffrey Hamlyn* would have made writers like Miles Franklin, Joseph Furphy and Prichard splutter with fury, with its partiality to Kingsley's destination marketing, for English readers, of the summery



Australian countryside. But that's not the whole story. Wilding makes the point that Hergenhan's editorial instinct was to avoid a dependency on the critical orthodoxies of the time. Perhaps Wilding's observation is one only a transnational scholar, with a fellow feeling for Adam Lindsay Gordon, and who has made a major contribution to Marcus Clarke scholarship, could make. At any rate, Wilding reads Horner and Kramer's articles on obviously non-native writers as 'against the developing nationalist trend' of the 1960s, a trend that was at the same time driving the slow infusion of Australian literature teaching into traditionally English university curricula. A related provocation, Wilding suggests, was his own article in *ALS* ('DHL in Australia', 1980) about D. H. Lawrence's *Kangaroo*, the

(above)

Cover of the first issue of *ALS*.

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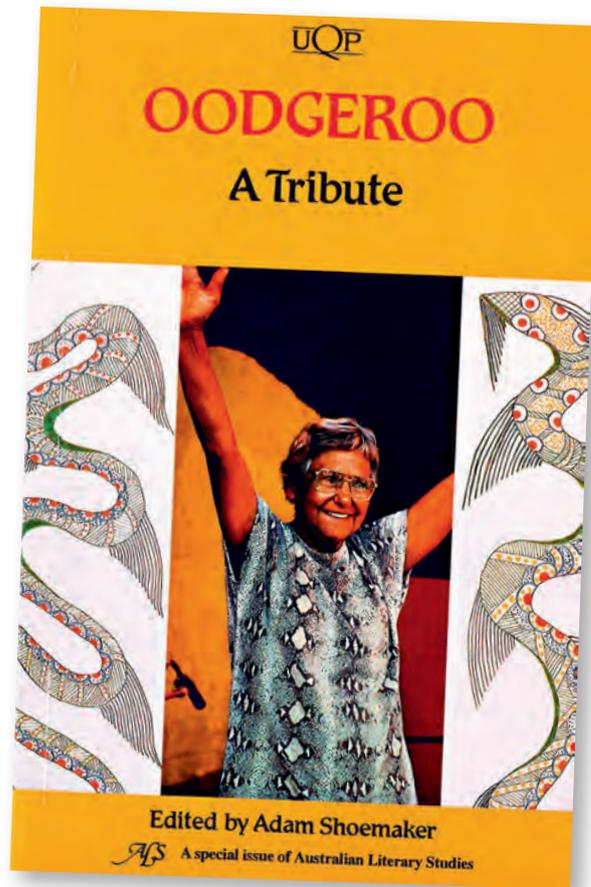
'bête noir of the nationalists'. Referring to a kangaroo as a bête noir is walking on the wild side. Wilding is certainly right to recognise Hergenhan's impulse to 'extend the traditional concerns of literary criticism and [...] the conception of what was acceptable beyond the literary'.⁶ And at the beginning of his memoir Hergenhan emphasises his sense of the journal's responsive and developing career, 'its changing relationship with its readerships, with universities, and with the public promotion of Australian literature'.⁷ This is a legacy of alertness to boundaries and sources of literary and critical innovation that the evolving discipline of literary studies in Australia is deeply indebted to, and that is extended into the present by *ALS*'s second editor, Leigh Dale, of Wollongong University.

Against the New Critical orthodoxy about the irrelevance, to understanding literary texts, of the author's biography or intentions, Hergenhan published interviews with writers (Ann Whitehead with Christina Stead, for example) and incorporated genre writing into serious literary study (Stephen Knight on 'Carter Brown'). For my generation, one landmark issue of the journal was the 'New Writing in Australia' special issue of October 1977 (8.2), with its acknowledgement of American avant-garde influences on writers of the late 1960s. The first line of Charles Olson's 'The Kingfishers', the opening poem of Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry* (1960), was the rubric over this issue: 'What does not change | is the will to change'. Surveys of poetry, fiction and little magazines from Frank Moorhouse,

Peter Carey, Carl Harrison-Ford and Martin Duwell, statements in poetics and cultural politics from John Tranter, Jennifer Maiden, Vicki Viidikas, Robert Kenny, questionnaires from a large sample of new writers of the time, all created a rich dissensus from an exuberant period in Australian literary culture.

Again, there was a useful bibliographical addition of 'A Checklist of New Writing in Australia'. Another memorable special issue was the warmly celebratory Oodgeroo tribute of 1994 (16.4), guest edited by Adam Shoemaker. In 1988 a special issue appeared in the form of *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia* (13.4). Here also Hergenhan's impulse is one of critique: 'why a "new" literary history of Australia

when there has been no lack of histories, including recent ones?'⁸ In this multi-authored volume, unsettled by reorientations about the national that were occasioned by the bicentennial 'celebration', Hergenhan argues that literary historiography needs regularly to re-examine the limits of its provincial and derivative practices. The 'New' here refers to the sense that such 'history needs to be reconceived: that approaches to the past do not simply reveal, they help to create it'. This literary history was designed to balance narrative and analysis and to avoid arbitrary divisions into 'periods predetermined by metaphors of progress or evolution', or rigid generic categories, or assumptions



(above)

Cover of the special issue *Oodgeroo* tribute of 1994 (16.4), guest edited by Adam Shoemaker.

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of hierarchised literary value.⁹ Chapters about melodrama, romance, documentary, speculative fiction, censorship, and literary production were included for the first time in an Australian literary history. Twenty-five years later, Paul Giles's article in the fiftieth-year *ALS*, 'English Studies in Australia: Repositioning the Subject', takes up Hergenhan's counsel with its call for a more 'coherent and characteristically antipodean approach to literary history', with its updated view to North American 'historical literacy' and to Asia's Australia.¹⁰

Hergenhan's impulse to seek archimedean points of observation on Australian literature is also reflected in another special issue, of 1991 (15.2), *European Perspectives: Contemporary Essays on Australian Literature*. This first collection devoted solely to studies in Australian literature by overseas critics drew Australian literature into debates on Eurocentrism and its complicated relations to Commonwealth Studies, national literature/

Gerhard Stilz, Lars Jensen) and by European-based Australianists like Russell West-Pavlov and his empirical study of translations of Australian literary works in the German Democratic Republic.

But there is something else that has very noticeably occurred over the course of *ALS*'s career, and it is clearly signalled in the titles of the fiftieth-year number, 'The English Issue', and of Leigh Dale's introduction, 'Reading English'. Editors Leigh Dale and Tanya Dalziell would be well aware of the estrangement effect of such an emphasis on 'English' in a milestone issue of the canonical journal of Australian literary studies. The change they are signalling is clear. They couldn't be less worried about national literature, or national identity, or national anything. What they *are* worried about, though, is the 'discipline'. Dale's introductory essay frames the issue as providing a series of 'snapshots' of 'the discipline of English at universities in the

CHAPTERS ABOUT MELODRAMA, ROMANCE, DOCUMENTARY, SPECULATIVE FICTION, CENSORSHIP, AND LITERARY PRODUCTION WERE INCLUDED FOR THE FIRST TIME IN AN AUSTRALIAN LITERARY HISTORY.

new literature paradigms, and postcolonial thinking. These European critical perspectives often fastened on to the literary-geographical imagination, not surprisingly, given 'Australia's' outline in the cartographic history of European discovery and exploration, its exotic, imaginary existence at the antipodes. Giovanna Capone, the Bologna-based editor of this *ALS* issue, rightly acknowledged the emergence of Indigenous and 'ethnic' (or multicultural) writers and was quick to recognise the transplantation in Australian writing of European idealism: McAuley's Quiros and his mythical Australia of the Holy Spirit; Patrick White's Laura Trevelyn and her 'Knowledge was never a matter of geography'. Together with the European Australian Studies Association, which had its inaugural conference in the same year, the 1991 *European Perspectives ALS* has fostered an environment for important, independent work on Australian literature by European critics (Xavier Pons,

Australasian region'.¹¹ This comparativist perspective includes articles by English studies scholars in India and New Zealand. It also finds space for acknowledgement of the wider discourse about the modern university, some of 'the most interesting' of which, as Dale argues, comes from North American literary scholars like Frank Donohue, Christopher Newfield and Sheila Slaughter.¹² The depth of Dale's interest in the history of English disciplinarity in Australia is no doubt a motivating factor in this issue. Her *Enchantment of English: Professing English Literatures in Australian Universities* (Sydney University Press, 2012) is essential reading for anyone involved with the humanities in Australia. Dale had previously presented, when Reviews Editor of *ALS*, a 'New Directions' section in a 1999 issue of the journal about the need for 'some "paradigm shifts" in thinking about Australian literary culture'.¹³ Once again the North American paradigm is influential: this set of

three articles (by Dale herself, David Carter and Gillian Whitlock) took its cue from the Modern Language Association's Association of Departments of English section with its focus on the 'state of the discipline'. The concerns in these three perspectives make an interesting comparison with those in the fiftieth-year 'English' issue of *ALS*; all sorts of things have shifted in the intervening years. The fiftieth-year issue provides multiple viewpoints on local variations in English studies, with some more panoramic approaches, like Paul Giles's and Vijay Mishra's. Clearly, the articles here provide a map of new thinking about disciplinarity, *after* the post-disciplinary turn of previous decades. It is significant, for instance, that Anthony Uhlmann's article about the founding of the Australian University Heads of English initiative appears in this issue.

But there is a regretful note in the midst of this anniversary that I think it is important to recognise. In Hergenhan's memoir he devotes considerable space to explaining the context around the final divergence in 1997 of *ALS* and the Literature Board of the Australia Council, which had helped subsidise the journal, an arrangement inherited from the Board's precursor, the Commonwealth Literary Fund (1908–1973). Contributing to this bureaucratic rift were complex seismic shifts in literary and academic culture, publishing, and arts funding budgets and policies. Editorials in *ALS* criticised the Board's decision strongly, but Hergenhan's memoir is concerned to present a balanced view. Can the cultural problem he draws attention to be resolved? How might *ALS* (or any journal of literary research and scholarship, for that matter) that helps to 'conserve a literary heritage' be re-integrated into contemporary Australian cultural policy?

When *ALS* started out as an intellectual and scholarly project in the professionalised study of Australian literature, then marginalised as a sub-literature in the discipline of English, there was virtually no discourse in Australia, at least publically or formally, about disciplines, or departments of knowledge. And certainly not in terms of their local territorialisation and development. English, then, was just a subject, an English subject in every sense, a settled and naturalised bit of educational and

cultural infrastructure. Now, evidently, *ALS* has evolved into (Australian) Literary Studies, a wide-reaching journal of literary studies in Australia. It remains one of the primary resources for (post-nationalising) knowledge about Australian literature but it also continues to be one of the important forums in which the conversation about the history, theory and practice of literary studies, or English as it is trending back to, is conducted in this country. ¶



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1. Michael Wilding, 'History of Scholarly Journals Writ Large', *The Australian*, 20 November 2013, <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/opinion/history-of-scholarly-journals-writ-large/story-e6frgcko-1226763586591#>> [accessed 9 February 2014].
2. Laurie Hergenhan, 'Editing *ALS*: A Memoir', *Australian Literary Studies*, 28:1–2 (May–June, 2013), p. 19.
3. Hergenhan, 'Editing *ALS*', p. 18.
4. Hergenhan, 'Editing *ALS*', p. 15.
5. Hergenhan, 'Editing *ALS*', p. 16.
6. Wilding.
7. Hergenhan, 'Editing *ALS*', p. 15.
8. Laurie Hergenhan, 'General Introduction', in *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia*, ed. by Laurie Hergenhan (Ringwood: Penguin, 1988); *Australian Literary Studies* 13:4 (October 1988), p. xi.
9. Hergenhan, 'General Introduction', pp. xvi–xvii.
10. Paul Giles, 'English Studies in Australia: Repositioning the Subject', *Australian Literary Studies* 28:1–2 (May–June, 2013), p. 36.
11. Leigh Dale, 'Reading English', *Australian Literary Studies* 28:1–2 (May–June, 2013), p. 1.
12. Dale, 'Reading English', p. 5.
13. Leigh Dale, 'New Directions: Introduction', *Australian Literary Studies* 19:2 (October 1999), p. 131.