

LAURENCE THOMAS (“LAURIE”) HERGENHAN AO FAHA

1931–2019



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When Laurie Hergenhan retired from his professorship at the University of Queensland (UQ) in 1996, his colleague Peter Edwards noted in a celebratory volume that ‘over many years he has been amongst [Australian literature’s] most effective advocates, its most tireless servants, its brightest luminaries’. However his earliest publications, based on the PhD he undertook at Birkbeck College in London, were textual and critical studies of the English novelist George Meredith. After Hergenhan took up a lectureship at the University of Tasmania in 1960, James McAuley (the poet and, from 1961, Professor and Head of the English Department) proposed, after discussions with A.D. Hope and Leonie Kramer, that the English Department in Hobart establish *Australian Literary Studies (ALS)*, modelled on Duke University’s *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism and Bibliography*, with Hergenhan as editor.

Hergenhan retained considerable respect for McAuley in spite of the latter’s controversial politics, defending him as ‘a generous, encouraging but not interfering Head’ who entrusted his junior staff member, who would edit *ALS* for the next 40 years, ‘with complete editorial independence’. Hope travelled to Hobart to launch the

first issue on 6 August 1963, having contributed to it a review of J. Normington-Rawling’s then recent biography of Charles Harpur.

As Hergenhan himself admitted, until moving to Hobart he knew little about Australian literature. McAuley suggested he visit the Mitchell Library in Sydney, a trip which made him aware of the rich resources available in the field. This resulted, in 1962, in an article in *Quadrant* on the expatriate author Frederick Manning and his World War I novel, *Her Privates We*. This article was read by the literary historian Geoffrey Dutton who wrote to mention a previous study of Manning’s writings Hergenhan had failed to consider. Laurie in reply thanked him but defended his oversight by commenting on the then poor state of literary bibliographic resources in Australia. The next year he contributed a 50-page bibliography to Dutton’s ground-breaking edited collection *The Literature of Australia*, based on the Mitchell Library card index, with sub-headings such as ‘The social background and contemporary scene’, ‘The cultural background and contemporary scene’, biographies, memoirs, manuscripts, and a detailed listing for each of over 40 major authors.

These early steps led Hergenhan both to a long-term interest in establishing a bibliographic record of Australian literature and critical writing on it, and in becoming a major contributor himself, although until 1970 he was still active in English literary studies, publishing an authoritative edition of Meredith’s *The Adventures of Harry Richmond*. Hergenhan’s 1972 *A Colonial City: High and Low Life: Selected Journalism of Marcus Clarke*, published by University of Queensland Press (UQP), was his first book-length contribution to what became a life-long commitment: Australian literature, broadly described and in historical context, from early convict-related works to contemporary prose and poetry and including European and American contributions, provocations and responses.

Soon after he was appointed as a lecturer in Hobart, Laurie Hergenhan suffered a debilitating stroke – he was only 32 – which left him for a time partly paralysed. Remarkably he recovered, resumed his career and had been promoted to Reader by the end of the decade but, by the time his edition of Clarke’s journalism appeared, he had left Hobart in 1971 to take up a Readership in the much larger English Department in Brisbane. In 1967

he had been in contact with the UQ reference librarian Spencer Routh who suggested that the comprehensive card indexes maintained in that university's Fryer Library of Australian Literature could be a useful source for the Annual Bibliographies which *ALS* had started publishing in each June issue. Routh himself co-edited the entry that year and from 1968 the work was undertaken in full by Fryer staff with clerical help from the UQ English Department.

UQ in the 1970s offered an attractive and supportive environment for Australian literary studies, which had been taught there – first as a component of the British English literary curriculum, then as a specialised course – since the mid-1920s. He quickly began to make a core contribution in the classroom and, after Alan Lawson was also appointed, they introduced additional units on contemporary Australian novels and short stories, setting themselves the challenge of including only works published in the two years prior to the course offering.

For several years afterwards, *ALS* was still based in Hobart with Dr Edward (Ted) Stokes as co-editor but, having persuaded UQ to allocate a small annual grant to replace what the University of Tasmania offered (plus funding from the Commonwealth Literary Fund/Australia Council Literature Board), Hergenhan transferred the journal to Brisbane in 1976 with UQP as publisher. He established significant international connections and began to attract both Australian and European research postgraduates. Several of these, at the event held to honour his memory at the Fryer Library on 24 August 2019, mentioned, as well as his generosity and warmth, his detailed and valued advice and feedback on their projects and thesis drafts.

Hergenhan built closer connections to UQP (particularly as general editor of its Portable Australian Authors series) and to other publishers of Australian writing. One of his major achievements in the 1970s was supporting, editing, and championing Xavier Herbert, who was then struggling to complete *Poor Fellow My Country*. The UQ English Department was persuaded to buy a photocopier for Herbert's use on which, from his home near Cairns, he copied out chapter drafts and posted them to Brisbane for Laurie's editing and comments. Herbert himself generously acknowledged this assistance, noting in a talk given shortly after the publication of the book and later published in the collection *The Making of Xavier Herbert's "Poor Fellow My Country"* (1988): "There was that magical thing; there was the finding of this man Hergenhan, at the time when I really needed a friend, as I needed a friend never before in my life".

In 1979 UQ set up an Australian Studies Centre (ASC) as a collaboration between the Departments of Anthropology, Art History, English, Government, and History, with Laurie as the logical, but soon disenchanted, founding

director. In 'Lead Me to Your Centre', his contribution to the commemorative volume *25th Anniversary Collection: Australian Studies Centre* (2005), he noted that there was no physical centre, just a corner of his room, and no ongoing funding. The Alumni Association supported a project led by Spencer Routh to microfilm regional Queensland newspapers while conferences, proceedings and occasional papers appeared under the ASC's banner but, apart from *ALS*'s and the Bibliography's modest funding, all relied on small one-off grants and volunteers.

In his contribution to the 25th anniversary volume, Graeme Turner suggested Australian studies had failed 'to interrogate its nationalist intellectual history', preferring 'a comfortable de facto union of literary and historical studies' and ignoring, in particular, the challenge cultural studies was making. The idea of 'Australian Literature' as McAuley and Hope had conceived it, had ceased to be an obvious or uncontested organisational principle, although Turner excepted Laurie Hergenhan himself from his general criticism, noting that he had 'responded well to these new developments without sacrificing the continuity with that early tradition'.

Probably the most influential of all Hergenhan's many publication projects was his general editorship of the 1988 Bicentennial *Penguin New Literary History of Australia* which immediately became a standard and invaluable resource, designed for a wide and varied audience. (Its comprehensive 35-page index alone made it the best starting point for research in many areas and on many writers.) Laurie specifically mentioned Dutton's *Literature of Australia* as precedent although one obvious difference, a consequence of his and others' efforts in the intervening quarter-century, was that John Arnold's Appendix 'Sources for the Study of Australian Literature' was a bibliography of bibliographies, listing many sources researchers could now go to for guidance including, of course, in *ALS*. In 1992 the annual bibliography was published cumulatively as *The ALS Guide to Australian Writers 1963–1990*; a second enlarged edition (to 1995) appeared in 1997. This print-based work later merged with the online AustLit database (<https://www.austlit.edu.au>) also based at UQ, led by the then Vice-Chancellor Professor John Hay and supported by his strategic fund.

Hergenhan published two major monographs, both relatively late in a career devoted substantially to his textual and journal editing, anthologising and bibliographic interests. The self-explanatory *Unnatural Lives: Studies in Australian Literature about the Convicts, from James Tucker to Patrick White* (UQP, 1983) brought together many of his major interests and earlier writings; it was reissued in 1993. The second was a culmination of two extended visits he made to the USA, in 1968 on a Carnegie Scholarship and in 1986 as a Fulbright Fellow. During the first, he met the director of the Harry Ransom Centre at the University of Austin in Texas, C. Hartley

Grattan, and became aware of Grattan's significant interest in, material collections of, and contribution to Australian politics and culture. This led to Laurie's 1995 biography *No Casual Traveller: Hartley Grattan and Australia-US Connections* (UQP).

Laurie Hergenhan was promoted to full Professor in 1992, elected to the Academy in 1993 and awarded the Order of Australia in 1994. He had a remarkable ability to attract and energise many other notable figures, including the five editors of and over 40 contributors to the *Penguin New Literary History*, and his long-term assistants at UQ: the poetry critic Martin Duwell; the bibliographers (and much more) Marianne Ehrhardt, Carol Hetherington, Joan Keating and Irmtraud Petersson; successive Fryer librarians; business managers Dr Stan Mellick and Heather Atkinson; and the reviews editor and ultimately his successor as general editor of *ALS*, Dr (later Professor) Leigh Dale. Petersson and Duwell co-edited the festschrift '*And what books do you read?*' *New Studies in Australian*

Literature (UQP, 1996), the year Hergenhan retired from UQ. A further memorial festschrift is promised from Laurie's many scholarly friends and former PhD students now working in European universities, edited by Antonella Riem (University of Udine, Italy), Martin Leer (Geneva) and Sue Ballyn (Barcelona).

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