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Book ~~LITERARY~~ REVIEWING

John McLaren

The book reviewer is both parasite and servant of literature. Without the writer the reviewer would have no work, yet it is probably through the reviews that the writer has the best chance of speaking to an audience. The reviewer however is not merely the huckster who drums up the crowds, but, like the man in front of the tent, for much of the crowd he is the show. Many readers satisfy themselves with the review rather than make the effort to buy and read the book. If, like George Orwell, we believe that a writer writes for the same reason that a baby cries, we may judge this as a good thing. Notice is being taken, and the writer's ideas are becoming part of the general currency. With the multiplicity of books in the modern world most sound ideas would receive negligible attention if they were not canvassed in the reviews. Yet there is a price to be paid, and this may not merely be in terms of financial loss to the author or of oversimplification and misrepresentation of his ideas. At the worst, the cost of substituting the reading of reviews for study of books may be a trivialisation of the intellectual life of the community.

The reviewer is a publicist of the book, reporting on the state of letters as his journalistic colleagues report on other aspects of the state of the world. His words form part of the total view of life being offered by the papers in which they appear, and they contribute to the commercial and political purposes of the papers. Then, he is a servant of the reader, giving him an account of the book and a judgement on it so that he may make up his own mind on its merits. Finally, however, he is a servant of the author, and through him of the community of letters within which the author wishes to play a part. It is certainly one task of the

reviewer to expose charlatans, but his more important function is to assess precisely what each author contributes to his subject. In this respect, the reviewer's task merges with that of the critic.

The Australian reader since the second world war has been well served by his reviewers. The amount of attention given to recent publications has improved both in amount and standard. There is now a substantial review section in the papers of record in each mainland capital city, as well as regular book reviews in provincial newspapers such as those in Townsville, Wollongong and Launceston. Other metropolitan papers provide book notices, but do not attempt to cover books in a systematic way. In addition, a variety of weeklies and periodicals give regular attention to new publications, as well of course as professional and academic journals. This quantity of review material would require a much longer study to survey, and I doubt whether the results would justify the effort. For the purposes of this chapter I shall confine myself to the major metropolitan papers and periodicals.

At the time of writing, systematic reviews of new books are provided in the Weekend Australian, and in the Saturday editions of the Sydney Morning Herald, the Age, Melbourne, the Canberra Times, the Advertiser, Adelaide, the Courier-Mail, Brisbane, and the West Australian, Perth. Reviews appear in the three national weeklies - the Bulletin, the National Times and Nation Review. The major literary periodicals carrying regular reviews are Southerly, Meanjin ~~Quarterly~~, Overland, Westerly and Quadrant, all quarterly except the last, which is monthly. A new series of Australian Book Review commenced in 1978 with the intention of publishing ten issues a year and reviewing or noticing every Australian book. All

the other publications mentioned review a mixture of Australian and overseas books, although the balance in the periodicals is strongly towards Australian publications.

I

In the past thirty years, the nature of weekly reviewing has changed. This change is part of the general change in newspapers, which in turn reflects changes in society at large. To return to the newspapers of 1948 is to return to a parochial world. The focus of the news was the Empire, the ideology was anti-Communism, and the chief domestic worry was the perfidy of the then Labor government. Even Mr Chifley's attempts to bolster the pound sterling by rationing petrol were seen as part of a plot to destroy free enterprise in Australia.* There is at least some comforting continuity in our national institutions.

* Argus, 15/9/48

These national obsessions were repeated in the book reviews. The Sydney Morning Herald's 'Books of the Week' section, the Melbourne Argus' 'Weekend Review' and the 'Age Literary Supplement' were the most serious review sections in the daily press, but even these were essentially feature-pages. It is hard in fact to draw any distinction in these pages between review, literary essay and feature, even although the Argus and the Sydney Morning Herald did separate their magazine sections.

The essential tone of the ~~writing~~ reviewing in all papers was bland and chatty. The selection of books for review favored those dealing with matters of strategic or political interest, Australian books, and belles-lettres. In September, 1948, books reviewed by these papers included a book on two New York lawyers, essays by Dean Inge, a study of Soviet-Nazi relations, a pamphlet issued by the Australian Catholic Bishops on the subject of socialism (given the lead review in the Argus, at this time the most virulently right-wing of the dailies), Brassey's Naval Annual, and books by or about Sacharavell Sitwell, T.S.Eliot, St John Philby (father of the then-active spy), Julian Huxley, Glubb Pasha and Erle Stanley Gardiner. Australian books reviewed included a biography of John Barton, books by Paul Hasluck and Frances Maguire on military matters, and recent fiction and poetry, including Coast to Coast, books by George Johnston and Ethel Anderson, Meanjin number 33, and Francis Webb's A Drum for Ben Boyd. The reviewer's task was either to let the reader know what was in the book or to chat about the subject matter. The attitude of the reviewers was that of armchair obersvers noting from a distance the quaint habits and ideas of a world which, except when it contained a communist or military threat, left the essentially undisturbed. They wrote for readers who felt comfortable in the world, and who, after the unfortunate interruption of the war, were intent on rebuilding the the secure order they had known. The critical comments were directed towards the writers' ability to hold the reader's attention or present him with a pleasing narrative - Graham Green was found wanting on the latter score. All the papers published columns of literary gossip, as much about writers as about their work. The exception to this pattern was Ian Mair, in the Age, whose reviews were marked by the individual voice of a person who cared about what he was reading and who worked hard to discover its meaning in relation to himself, the writer, and the outside world.

Outside Sydney and Melbourne, the metropolitan dailies offered little of either review or criticism. The Hobart Mercury offered 'Book of the Week,' review by 'Scribe' of about 500 words. The Adelaide Advertiser offered only one third of a page, but in this it fitted about five reviews with an average length of 500 words. These combined information about the book with some critical appraisal. The West Australian had a 'Books in Brief' column each Saturday, in which it noticed five or six titles in a total of 700 words. The Courier-Mail carried a single review each Saturday by Warwick Lawrence. In these he covered one or two books in outline, together with brief notes on four or five others. Katherine Prichard's Golden Miles (sic), for example, was described as 'rich and robust in character and background.' Lawrence's reviews tended to be disorganised assemblages of impressions, but he did have a consistent worry about communism.

II

Although the genteel mood continued to characterise much Australian literary reviewing until the 1960s, alongside it a current of serious criticism slowly developed. This slow change was probably brought about by the spread of general education, and by the conflicts on the left of politics which centred first on the Labor split and then on the global realignment and ideological reassessment of the Communist movement that followed Kruschev's address to the 1956 Congress, and his subsequent invasion of Hungary. Most important however was the gradual realisation that economically and militarily we were on our own, and that the conflicts of people and ideas beyond our shores did affect us. The main news and feature pages of the newspapers scarcely reflected these changes, other than by reporting the more dramatic highlights, but the review pages gradually started to question the complacency of that comfortable Menzies society.

By September, 1958, the Saturday editions of the Sydney Morning Herald and the Age had grown to 64 pages each. The Herald devoted two of these pages to 'New Books,' and 'The Age Literary Supplement' spread to four pages, of which about two were given to book reviews. Leon Gellert still wrote a weekly column for the Herald, but usually centred it on a single book, and the Age still mixed its reviews with general articles on such topics as travel, Britain's search for the America's Cup, or Australia's architectural muddle. In both papers a greater proportion of Australian books were noticed than ten years earlier, but the majority of books reviewed were English or American, chosen as much for their entertainment value as for their significance to life in Australia.

One book reviewed by both papers was Hal Porter's novel, A Handful of Pennies. In the Herald, Sydney J. Baker's review coupled it with Erle Wilson's Adams of the Bounty, but devoted the greater part of his review to Porter. He started with the claim that 'These novels give heartening new evidence that Australian literature is growing up. Perhaps more important, they reveal that our novels do not have to deal exclusively with parish-pump themes in order to acquire status.' (1) This is characteristic of most of the reviewing of Australian work at this time. The reviewers still wanted the writers to reveal specifically Australian life to them, but they were anxious also that this work should take its place on the world stage on its own merits rather than because of the extrinsic attraction of the subject matter.

1. SMH, 27/9/1958.

Ian Mair, in the Age, took a different approach. Although his review was only 600 words long, he was able in this space to place the book in its context, analyse both story and style, and pass judgement, not on its entertainment value or its Australianess, but on its intrinsic value. He opnes his review with the observation that 'Hal Porter ~~has~~ seems to have inspected the Australian novel and to have decided that, by and large, it lacks style. Obviously, he is the man to remedy matters. The outcome is 'A Handful of Pennies'. It is about Australian officers, and one Australian woman, in the occupation forces in Japan after the last war. But why discuss its subject? Everything is in its style . . .' He concludes that the novel is a failure because '. . .there has to be some standard of value, and Mr. Porter sets up none . . . They are not people, they are predicaments.'* Mair was at this time reviewing ~~two~~ one or two ~~or more~~ books a week, on subjects varying from opal-mining to the Boer War, but maintained in all an incisive wit and critical judgement which, amongst his contemporaries, was matched consistently only by A.A.Phillips. ~~In general, however,~~ Reviewers, woe, however, starting to take the responsibility of judging as seriously as that of reporting. In the Sydney Morning Herald, for example, Craig McGregor carefully argued his disagreement with a study of The American Novel and its Tradition, and Barbara Jeffries provided a detailed and appreciative response to one novel while dismissing a second with a brief summary of its content, strengths and weaknesses.* The papers now employed a greater variety of reviewers, but seemed wary of giving them very much space to develop their themes, except in the case of books like Robert Jungk's Brighter Than a Thousand Suns - reviewed in practically all the papers in this month - or tales of wartime. ~~In both cases the reviews~~ In the first case the reviews presented arguments about a serious contemporary issue, and in the other the reviewers could be relied on for a paraphrase of the highlights, so that their reviews could be regarded as feature articles which would not tire their readers' patience with detailed critical analysis. In this respect, the Sydney

Age, 27/9/58

SMH 6/9/58

Morning Herald was more generous than the Age, and during this month gave both Barbara Jeffries and Sydney Baker 1000 words to discuss a brace of novels, an opportunity they use to examine the novels in detail against a carefully stated set of criteria. There is still however a great deal of reviewing which goes little further than paraphrase, and there are still too many shallow and external judgements like that of Clement Semmler on Virginia Wolfe:

> Yet, above all, Virginia Wolfe writes as a woman. Therein lies her strength and therein also her weakness - to the extent that now and then she drops her guard, and inscribes passages of the sweet deadliness peculiar to a highly feminine intelligence.*

MH 20/9/68

Apart from the Sydney Morning Herald and the Age, there was still little serious reviewing in the daily press. The Argus had, after a seven-year attempt to establish itself as a popular Labor-leaning daily, been closed by its London owners. 'The Scribes' column continued in the Mercury, now on Thursdays instead of Saturdays. Roger Covell had a column in the Courier-Mail, in which he covered three or four books each week. The Advertiser covered a large number of books in a full broadsheet page each Saturday, but the reviews contained little criticism as such. The West Australian gave one tabloid page to reviews, mostly descriptive. The Canberra Times, at this period still essentially a provincial paper, also gave a full tabloid page to books, with some three 400 word general reviews and a review of children's books.

An interesting endeavour about this period was the publication in Melbourne of the Australian Weekend Review, a 16-page quarto sized paper which appeared fortnightly for some 21 issues from March 1950 to February 1951. The first issue of this publication contained 15 reviews, of up to 1000 words, and covering 28 books, all but one of them from overseas. The exception was Walter James' Barrel and Book, which received a cheerful welcome. The Review claimed in its editorial that its policy was to

encourage criticism, but most of its reviewing was determinedly middle-brow, although it did later publish such reviewers as Ian Mair, A.R. Chisholm and C.M.H. Clark. Clark's reviewing was characteristically informed, judgemental and witty. He alone could start a review of a history of the British Empire with the recollection that 'One of the stock distractions from distress during the great depression was the large scores made by cricket teams,' and conclude with the remark that the book fails because the author 'had the material; but he uses it all in the service of the supporters of privilege' (23-2-51).

Despite the inclusion of such writers, however, and despite its efforts to widen its appeal by taking note of the cinema and of gramophone recordings, and by publishing short stories and poetry, the Weekend Review apparently failed to find sufficient circulation or advertising, and disappeared after February 1951.

III

The main organ for literary reviewing during these decades was the Bulletin, where Douglas Stewart edited, and usually wrote, the Red Page. In 1948 this was still a large format page, with about 2500 words.

By 1958 the page size had been halved, but the Red Page was allowed to extend to the back of the journal, so that the langth of reviews remained the same. Each week Stewart or his contributors dealt with from two to four books, with brief notes on others. The greater part of the books reviewed was Australian, but Stewart seems also to have dealt with books from overseas that, like Catcher in the Rye, had achieved some notoriety, or that took his fancy for their subject matter. The style of the reviewing reflected the politics of the journal. Stewart praised work that maintained the rural tradition of Australian writing, that rejected the 'slum fashion', and that avoided 'propagandist bias' by dealing with characters even-handedly rather than from a working-class position. This rejection of what was seen as propaganda in literature is mentioned also by writers in the Sydney Morning Herald, and seems to have been a Sydney orthodoxy.

Certainly, the same political attitude characterised the fortnightly journal established in that year, the Observer, which, when it amalgamated with the Bulletin, transformed the older paper from the bushman's Bible to the businessman's gazette. Although the conservatism was common to both styles, the newer journal was much sharper and more combatitive. This change, perhaps a symbol of conservatism under attack, appears also in the reviews. The relaxed tone of Stewart's writing is that of a man who accepts literature as an embelishment and endorsement of the central values of a life whose problems are domestic rather than social, the new criticism is very concerned with the quality of the commodity being offered to the reader. Traditional values are proferred as a form of quality control. Thus, in the first issue of the Observer, an anonymous reviewer, possibly the editor, Donald Horne, takes Patrick White's Voss to task for its abuse of language.

> At its worst it is a nightmare example of how a novel or even a note to the milkman should not be written . . . Reading the first hundred pages or so of Voss is like assisting at some weird re-birth of the English language . . . It is only when the novel gets out of Sydney and into the bush that Mr. White shows he can write.*

*Observer, 22/2/58

The Observer was answered after six months from the liberal left by another fortnightly, the Nation, also published from Sydney. Nation reviewed two or three books in each issue at slightly greater length than was allowed in the daily press. Its reviews were characterised by their seriousness, by the reviewers' knowledge of their subjects and clear point of view, and by their careful indication of the scope and subjects of the books under review. Yet neither in Nation, which eventually, in 1972, merged in the weekly Nation Review, nor in the Observer, was there ever regular reviewing which achieved what Max Harris described as 'a sense of intellectual self-sufficiency'.*

*Nation 12/2/59

IV

By 1968 the newspaper scene had changed for the better. The establishment of The Australian as a national daily which at that time aspired to be a journal of both record and intellectual debate, and the acquisition by the Fairfax group of the Canberra Times, enlarged the forum for reviews and stimulated a competition of quality. Both papers published a two page book review section as part of their Saturday features. Like the Sydney Morning Herald and the Age, they provided about eight reviews a week, but were slightly more generous in length, and were not afraid to allow a reviewer 1000-1500 words to tackle a serious book.

These changes in content were part of a general change in the Australian press which began about this time. Partly under the influence of competition from television, partly no doubt as a result of proprietorial competition, newspapers returned to the responsibility they had once accepted for reflecting on events as well as reporting them and for nurturing the development and exchange of ideas which provide the basis for social and political action. One mark of this was the increased prominence given to editorials, another the increased space for feature articles, often by outside contributors. The feature articles gradually changed, too, from background reporting or magazine-style entertainment, to detailed studies and thoughtful polemics. The book pages of the papers were an integral part of these changes, and no longer a piece of peripheral entertainment tacked on to the serious reporting. In this way the newspapers took over some of the functions which had been pioneered by the fortnightly journals and by the new-style Bulletin. These changes had, however, less effect on newspapers on the outlying states, which remained suspicious of books and ideas alike, and where the reviews still appeared as part of the Saturday entertainment.

The reviews in the Sydney Morning Herald at this time betray some unease in finding a new role. There are numbers of short paraphrases of books which seem to have been selected mainly for their entertainment value. Then there are books of contemporary history, which tend to be reviewed at greater length in the form of paraphrase plus judgement. Finally, there are the reviews of books of substantial literary merit, where the reviewers place the books in their context, analyse content and style, and pass judgements on each book's achievement rather than merely its appeal. As well as Australian works, new books from Gunter Grass, Mordecai Richler, Boris Pasternak and Muriel Sparke were reviewed in this manner during September, and some of the reviews amount to serious critical essays. Nevertheless, the occasional note of philistinism appears, as in Esther Corsellis' review of Ellen Jose's novel The Opportunists, which opens with these words:

> While the candidates in the Great Australian Novel Stakes are producing material for university Australian Lit. courses, other less ambitious novelists are keeping readers remarkably well supplied with pleasant, unpretentious and entertaining fiction with an Australian setting.
>
> Such a novel is "The Opportunists," a story of Melbourne in the 1860s in which period charm is successfully achieved without being laid on too thick.

SMH 7.9.68

She then praises the writer for having done 'the right kind of research,' for making her 'characters live,' and because her 'story is absorbing.' The remainder of the review paraphrases the story.

Characteristic of the best reviewing, on the other hand, was the review by Maurice Vintner of There Was a Man of Our Town, by Keith Thomas. Vintner uses the occasion to discuss the state of the novel in Australia and to place Thomas' book in relation to it.

The review - which incidentally takes only 700 words - maintains the familiar concern with what is distinctively Australian, but in terms of attitude and voice rather than of local colour. The question is no longer whether the book is an accurate or worthy representation of Australia, but what it says by virtue of being Australian, The reviewer's, like the novelist's, assumed audience is those who share the predicament of the twentieth century.

Reviews in the Age at this time had a similar style, but with more emphasis on current affairs. By this time the old title, 'The Age Literary Supplement' had been superseded by the 'Saturday Pages', which incorporated two pages of the 'Literary Review'. During September 1968 these pages included reviews of books on Australian architecture, black power, cosmology, foreign policy, the United Nations, psychotherapy, Australian trade unions, Australian schools, Vatican politics, Moishe Tshombe, Jewish resistance to the Nazis, and universities in the modern world. These reviews generally examined the content of the books under discussion and advanced the debate by considering the issues raised. There are fewer lengthy reviews than in the Sydney Morning Herald, and these are mainly of books on history or current affairs. Reviews of novels are descriptive or appreciative. The one significant piece of criticism is a review by Dennis Douglas of two recent works of scholarly literary criticism, one on Blake and one on Shakespeare and Marlowe. Douglas discusses the first in terms of its methods, which he finds wanting. He then carefully sets out the criteria for a work of the kind of the second, which seeks to place the dramatists in their period, and he shows how the book successsfully meets these criteria. His review meets his own requirement of 'giving precisely the sense of response to the experience of the text', and is in this sense characteristic of the best reviewing in the Age at this time. The regular reader of its reviews could feel that he was engaging seriously with the problems of his time, albeit intellectually rather than completely, which is to say artistically. Yet the almost total lack of response to reviews in the letters column, then as now, suggests the kind of weakness inherent in all reviewing. The better the review, the less likely is the reader to turn to the book.

The Australian during this month covered a similar range of books, but its longer reviews were largely given to historical works. It did however publish five genuinely critical reviews, of which two were of Australian writing. Rodney Hall, reviewing collections of poetry by Bruce Dawe and Gwen Harwood, analysed particular poems of each in order to determine the nature of each writer's work. Brian Kiernan, reviewing two novels of the Vietnam war, framed his review by looking at the problem of fiction which confronts a particular issue. Both reviewers assume a serious interest on the part of their readers, and they go beyond telling us whether or not we might enjoy the books being considered and advance our understanding of the quality of the contribution being made by particular writers to our comprehension of our time.

The Canberra Times, by 1968 a broadsheet, devoted two pages each Saturday to reviews of books ranging from science fiction and juvenile literature to travel, recreation and art. There were at least two substantial reviews each week, but there was an air of the academy about the whole operation - many of the reviews consisted either of a summary of the content, with an indication of deficiencies of documentation or scope, or learned discussion of matters chiefly of interest to specialists. The paper did maintain a consistent interest in imaginative literature, both foreign and domestic, and the literary editor devoted one of his weekly columns to a review of two Australian literary journals, in the course of which he boldly if unwisely committed himself to the prophecy that Southerly was about to die of inanition.* Books of history, poetry and fiction all received major reviews, but the most important review during September was an essay by T.Inglis Moore on Volume Two of the Collected Verse of Henry Lawson. Moore discusses the watershed of Lawson's visit to London which occurred between the period covered by this volume and that of his earlier work. He concludes 'It is no wonder that Lawson, in this hapless stage,

* Canberra Times, 21/9/68

> It is no wonder that Lawson, in this hapless stage, turned introvert to become a highly personal poet brooding over his wrongs or his sins, probing issues of good and evil, of sin and suffering . . . this second volume of his verse is mainly emotional and reflective, just as his first had been lyrical and pictorial. Its inward looking is the very opposite of the artistic, observant detachment that helped him create some of the world's finest short stories . . . '*

*Canberra Times, 7/9/68

This essay, in both length and tone, is of the kind that we might expect to find in a literary periodical, and it is doubtful if any other daily paper would have been prepared to use it. Certainly, only the Sydney Morning Herald of the time regularly carried literary reviews of similar quality, and it did not offer its readers the kind of weekly literary journal which the Canberra Times provided.

The situation in other capital cities was less satisfactory. In Adelaide, the Advertiser provided a single page of reviews each week. This page carried two or three reviews of between 750 and 900 words each, and brief notes on other books. A book on the fall of Singapore elicited the most critical review, in which the reviewer used his own knowledge to take issue with the author's thesis. Literary reviewing, however, provided descriptive appraisal rather than an attempt to come to grips with the issues raised in the books. Thus a review of Thea Astley's A Boat Load of Home Folk finished with the journalistic consumer's report: 'Once he accepts that these things truly represent the atmosphere of the tropics and that temptations flourish and morals rot readily in a hot climate, the reader will enjoy a rattling good story, guaranteed to titillate the gratifying sensations of pity, revulsion and contempt for his fellow men.'* Nevertheless, in both scope and judgement, the Advertiser was giving its readers a reasonable account of new writing available to them.

*Advertiser, 14/9/68

Readers of the West Australian also had some reason to believe that their paper was attempting to keep abreast of current writing. Although it gave only one out of 80 tabloid pages on a Saturday to books, it managed to fit in about five each week. The reviewers did attempt to give some kind of considered judgement, but the space available did not allow them to go much beyond a descriptive paraphrase. Value judgements were limited to questions of whether the books satisfactorily represented their subject matter or advanced our ~~understanding~~ conceptions of the Australian identity.

Matters were however even worse in Brisbane and Hobart. The Brisbane Courier-Mail had expanded its review space to the greater part of one of its two Saturday magazine pages, but this allowed room only for a major review by David Rowbotham, of 600-700 words, a second review of about 300 words, and a quick look at a further handful of books. A feature of ~~the~~ September ~~reviews~~ was a 400 word review of children's books by Anne Bower-Ingram, but otherwise the main burden of criticism lay with Rowbotham, who each week provided a thoughtful and informative assessment of a single book. The quality of these did not however compensate for the narrowness of scope, either in the range of books noticed or the number of voices heard. In Hobart matters were even worse. The Mercury provided only a single, anonymous review each Saturday, together with a list of books received. The books noticed seemed to be chosen at random, and the reviews consisted of little more than a summary of contents and paraphrase of the highlights. They were magazine articles rather than informative or critical reviews. The exception was a review of the Pacific Book of Australian Science Fiction, in which the reviewer discussed the place of science fiction in relation to national consciousness.

> To succeed commercially and critically, SF like every other art form, has to appeal as much to the Japanese and peruvians as the home-grown literati.
>
> I can't imagine anything more appalling than herds of kangaroos taken over by blue-jelly-like beings from Aloha Centauri or Arunta tribesmen holding the world to ransom with nuclear-headed boomerangs.
>
> Science fiction has its genres...But they are international genres.

Mercury
28.9.68

The writer then summarises the content of the stories in the anthology, without attempting to relate his critical principle to any actual assessment of their success. The mixture of commercialism and condescension in his introduction, however, betrays his uncertainty about the place of literature or the purpose of reviews.

V

Between 1968 and 1978 the condition of book reviewing in Australia remained fairly static. The major dailies maintained about the same space for book reviews, and published about the same overall number of reviews and covering a similar number of books, but the upper limits of size and the proportion of longer reviews both tended to diminish. The Sydney Morning Herald has published as few as four reviews in a week, and the Mercury appears to have abandoned reviewing altogether, possibly in the belief that its literate readers will buy a mainland newspaper anyway. The Launceston Examiner publishes a weekly review section, provided mainly by staff members from the local college of advanced education. Other provincial dailies which publish regular reviews include the Illawarra Mercury and the Townsville Bulletin. The most dramatic changes in policy have occurred on the Weekend Australian, which appointed a new literary editor, Peter Ward, in 1978, and another, Buzz Kennedy, in 1979. Peter Ward appeared to intend changing the literary pages from the familiar collection of reviews into an intellectual organ which would make its own contribution to public life. As well as the reviews, he introduced a column in which various literary figures were invited to present provocative views on such matter as the value of subsidies or poetry, and added a feature article which took up to half a page of space and was often extracted from a book recently issued overseas but not yet generally known in Australia. It was difficult however to discern a definite policy, and the reviews themselves suffered both in space and in selection. Since Buzz Kennedy took over the policy seems to have been to make the pages brighter, to provide its readers with a guide to literary fashions. Long reviews are informative rather than critical, the range of reviewers is smaller and contains a greater proportion of staff contributors, and there is a tendency to group large numbers of

books together in a single review. An interesting innovation has been the publication of a regular review by Ken Goodwin in which he manages to keep abreast of the flood of poetry pouring from Australian presses. However, although his comments are masterpieces of pertinent condensation his space does not allow him to give readers more than a taste of the books he mentions. The overall selection of books continues to be random, and the longer reviews are reserved for explnatory accounts of such subjects as the philosophy of Ki.

Another phenomenon of this decade has been the rise and fall of a serious weekly press. The new-style Bulletin maintains its style as a businessman's magazine, but for a period of eighteen months from 1971 the Sunday Australian flourished as a quality weekend paper. Before it disappeared into the Sunday Telegraph after News Limited acquired the Packer newspapers, it published reviews, some of them from overseas papers, of the same quality as its Saturday companion, but after the amalgamation these were reduced in size and numbers, and eventually eliminated altogether. Another attempt to start a quality Sunday newspaper was made in 1978 by the Canberra Times, which commenced the publication of a Sunday edition. This publishes about two serious reviews a week, but as yet has not attempted to emulate the range and quality of the Saturday edition.

A greater impact on intellectual life in Australia has been made by Nation Review and the National Times, two weekly papers which commenced publication at the beginning of the seventies. Nation Review was originally published by Gordon Barton, and has remained independent of any newspaper group. The National Times is owned by the Fairfax group but is edited separately. Both papers are weekly not only in their frequency but also in the sense that they give the news of the week rather than of the day.

Nation Review started its life as the Sunday Review, and appeared to be something of a cross between the Guardian Weekly and the New York Review of Books. As it developed, however, it consciously adopted the role of an alternative press, publishing news that others ignored and cultivating a brash larrikin style of writing which bruised many sensitivities but also recalled some of the older traditions of Australian journalism going back through Smith's Weekly to the early Bulletin. Its freedom from restraint mocked the suave gentility of the establishment press and reasserted the language of reporting and comment as a personal assault on meaning. These characteristics carried over into the literary pages. At first these attempted to provide a comprehensive cover of important Australian and overseas books, on much the same pattern as the Saturday reviews, but gradually they became infected by the more idiosyncratic characteristics of the remainder of the paper. The editors used their discretion to choose books that they considered of particular significance, and the reviewers were given the space to analyse them thoroughly. This they did with gusto, and writers like Humphrey McQueen used the opportunity not only to deal with the books in their own terms, but to go behind these and ferret out the assumptions on which these were based. Unfortunately, however, the changing mood of the community, and possibly a loss of interest by the publisher, led to the paper's idiosyncracies becoming mere erraticism, its fortunes declined, and it was eventually sold. Under its new ownership it publishes occasional book reviews from overseas sources or contributed, but has not yet developed any clear policy.

The cheeky irreverence of Nation Review has never been matched in the National Times, which has remained conservative, not to say stuffy, in style, even though it has moved to a left-liberal position politically and has acquired many writers contributors who achieved their first eminence on Nation Review. The National Times publishes a monthly feature, 'Book World', which contains half a dozen pages of reviews of up to 2000 words, and also includes two or three reviews in each of its other issues. It

does not seek the comprehensive coverage of the dailies, but concentrates on books of some intellectual significance. Its reviewing is stronger on history and politics than on imaginative literature.

This period saw also, in 1978, the commencement of a new series of the Australian Book Review, which had previously been published by Max Harris from Adelaide. The new series was sponsored by the National Book Council, and had a policy of noticing every new Australian book published. There was an immediate difficulty in defining what was meant by an Australian book, as several publishers had, since the collapse of the international book agreement which had tied Australian markets to Britain, entered into arrangements to issue Australian editions of works originating overseas and having no necessary connection with this country. The problem was overcome by accepting as Australian any book originating in this country, by an Australian national or a resident in the country, or about Australia. Books were initially noticed either by a brief note or by a comprehensive review, but as this led to problems both of space and of blandness this policy was changed during 1979. Present policy is to notice all imaginative writing - poetry, drama and fiction - by a review matched in length to the importance of the book, and to notice all other books initially with a short notice. Significant books can then be grouped for further attention in a review article in which the reviewer can take up all the issues the books raise. In addition, opportunity is taken to use recent work by an established writer to provide a retrospective review which examines his whole achievement to date.

The most obvious quality of the review pages of the dailies is their similarity, apart from the exception already noted of the Weekend Australian. The Sydney Morning Herald and the Canberra Times have had a change of literary editorship in recent years, but their policy has remained steady. Like the Age, they publish about two pages of reviews each week, they choose much the same books, and they even call on the same pool of reviewers. If there is any difference between these three papers, it is that Stuart Sayers of the Age is occasionally able to get some extra space, and that he probably reviews a greater proportion of war memoirs than do the others. But the differences between the papers from week to week depend much more on the particular reviewers they have used than on any discernible personality of the editor. The differences in the other cities are that their reviews are blander and their space more limited.

In the four major dailies the reviewing varies from informative to disputative. One improvement in the last decade has been in the quality of reviewing children's books, although many reviewers still are in doubt about the appropriate criteria to use in this field, some even reflecting contemporary worries about patronage and elitism to the extent that they substitute children's estimates of value for their own. Walter McVitty, who reviews children's books regularly in the Age, resolves this problem by taking the books seriously as art, allowing his assessment of their suitability for children to remain implicit, a consequence, not a cause, of their artistic merit. Other papers, however, still tend to give their children's book reviewers too little space for such careful development of an argument.

The nature of the general reviews varies from informative to disputative. There are few now published, at least in these four major metropolitan papers, which merely use highlights from the book to construct a feature article appealing on the grounds of its intrinsic interest rather than for what it says about the book. A ~~correspondingly~~

higher proportion of reviews come from contributors, particularly academics, who have a specialist interest in the subject of the book being considered. Some of these merely take issue with the author on points about which they disagree, others paraphrase the book and then point to its value, some write an essay on the same subject as the book, a few are adept at isolating the issues in such a way as to give an account of the content while still setting the book in its context and indicating the matters which are important and debatable.

The reviewer's task is more complex in relation to poetry and fiction. While lesser novels may be dismissed in routine notices which give details of setting, story and characters, too much contemporary fiction challenges these conventions for this approach to be satisfactory in many cases. The best of the reviewers therefore struggle to allow the new work to define itself through their responses. This can lead to disagreements and awkwardness of judgements, but it does allow new voices to obtain a hearing without premature praise or condemnation. On the other hand, established writers who do not produce something strikingly original may be dismissed in group reviews which barely give the contents and style of each of the works considered, without any real indication of whether any of the books are worth the time it would take to read them.

The limitations of space allow the reviewer only to assert and, to a limited extent, argue, but not to demonstrate. Still less can he examine his own responses and then move back from these to a consideration of why the author has adopted this particular form, what he could hope to achieve through it, and whether he succeeds. The danger of these limitations is not so much that new writers of genius will encounter the reception which awaited Patrick White in Nation, but that innovative writers of neither genius nor talent will be able to impose themselves on the public, thus contributing to decay of all standards. To some extent this danger can be averted through the more lengthy discussion which the quarterlies can permit, but these

speak only to a small audience, and their resources enable them to cover only a small proportion of new writing. There is still the need for more regular reviewing which will be coupled with the discussion of critical theory and the presentation of alternative judgements.

A recent novel which has called forth a reasonably lengthy review is David Malouf's An Imaginary Life. In this novel, his second, Malouf leaves the Australian environment and the twentieth century to explore the problems of living, being and becoming in a Black Sea province of imperial Rome. The novel is therefore a challenge to the reviewer to assess not only its nature and success, but also the difference it makes to our understanding of ourselves. The reviewers rise to the first of these challenges, but the lack of clear criteria of judgement, or even of any agreement on the nature of literature or the value of what it offers, prevents them tackling the second.

Rosemary McAllister (SMH,30.9.78) and Katha Pollitt (Australian 15/16.7.78) both related Malouf's novel to Ovid's Metamorphoses, in which he explores the transformations of men and women, yet they reached quite opposite conclusions about the novel's culmination. Pollitt wrote that the novel was 'essentially a meditation on the dialectic between the human and the non-human...Mr. Malouf has many penetrating and even original things to say about what it means to be human... I was sorry to have it all end in the standard modern wish to dissolve the self in blissed-out communion with the universe...' McAllister recognised that the author achieved the poet's metamorhposis 'not by sending the poet to the empyrean for mythological adventure, but by bringing him down to earth. Curiously, in the process, the transcendental becomes movingly real.

Poetry reviewers have an even greater problem. Not only are they confronted with a bewildering variety of books, usually to be covered in the most restricted space, but also they have to contend with a lack of either any great demonstrated public interest in contemporary poetry or any generally agreed standards of judgement. As contrasting examples of the consequence, we can consider reviews by Carol Treloar

(Australian, 29/30.4.78) and Thomas Shapcott (Age, 1.7.78). Treloar had 700 words to review four new books, and although she appeared sensitive and informed, she had no room to explain her views, only to state them. The consequence was a review which had to speak in such generalities as 'intelligent, rigorous, witty and moving; the athletic agility of his taut poetic imagination rarely fails to surprise while at the same time being eminently accessible.' A single quotation does, however, enable us to understand what she means about another poet's work in which 'story-telling ballad traditions underpin the poem, making rich metaphor for for immediate emotional drama.' The feeling of the review was, however, that the writer's care had gone into finding the appropriate words to describe her reactions rather than to telling us what the poetry does.

Shapcott, on the other hand, who had a similar amount of space - 1000 words for five books of poetry - tried to place the poets in the context of their purposes and concerns rather than their effects. He did this in the light of his introductory remark that our enjoyment of poetry ' can be vitally modified by exactly this sense of perspective in terms of individual, or cultural, growth.' Yet space ultimately defeated him, too, so that his account of the poems was limited to remarks about effects - the 'courtly, after-dinner warmth' of Fitzgerald, or the 'insight' and 'mature vitality' of Campbell. The reader was left wondering, not only about the object of the insight, but also its result.

A very different kind of poetry review was provided in the National Times, where Andrew Taylor was allowed 1000 words of commentary and 35 lines of quotation to discuss books by John Tranter and Rae Desmond Jones (week ending 27.5.78). This enabled him to discuss developments

in the writers' work, and the contents, style and theme of the poems, and still come to a conclusion about their importance. The review gave an account not only of what we might find in these books, but also of what kind of attention we should pay to it. Yet we are left wondering why these two particular books are singled out for this particular attention - perhaps because they arrived from the same publisher at the same time? Certainly, while this review distinguished between two collections, the National Times in general seems no more successful than its contemporaries in singling out those new poetry collections which deserve sustained attention and those which should be discarded. In this respect, a policy of selection is no more adequate than attempts to be inclusive.

It is probable, however, that the fault with poetry reviewing

lies neither with the reviewers nor with the space limits of the newspapers which publish them, but with the nature of contemporary poetry publication itself. Too many collections are published, each with a limited audience, for proper attention to be paid to any, or for those which have a genuine claim on our attention to emerge from the general cacophony. Poetry reviewers are hard to find, and when editors do find them they tend to overload them with work until they cry enough, demanding to be freed from the torrent of words in order to rediscover themselves and get on with their own living. Yet neither review nor reviewer has yet found out how to stem the tide which threatens to destroy what should be both the most discriminating and the most popular of art forms. Perhaps all journals should adopt a policy of refusing to review any poetry book with an edition of ~~fewer~~ less than ~~one~~ a thousand.

In general, then, reviewing in Australian newspapers and journals today is a mixed picture. On the one hand, there ~~is~~ are a number of publications which give a sustained and serious attention to new books, both from Australia and from overseas. The reviews which merely paraphrase highlights are diminishing, and most reviewers now seek to analyse the issues raised by the books they notice and to give a dispassionate judgement on them. On the other hand, there is a confusion of standards and a lack of any sense of continuing intellectual debate in the review pages, about either social or artistic issues. The corollary of this is that there are few individual voices among the reviewers, who tend to take a stance of scholarly detachment or journalistic cynicism rather than of personal commitment. It is as though they had confused bias with engagement, and dispassionate judgement with apathy.

We may still ask, however, about the effectiveness of book reviewing. In reading back through the reviews published over a period of thirty years one finds many books then given prominent notice which have since sunk without trace. Where these books have dealt with contemporary issues this does not matter, as the reviews served to advance debate at the time. Where they have been works of creative imagination such ephemeral fame reflects the failure to establish agreed standards of judgement, although the reviews may have helped to widen the market for such writing at the time. The effectiveness of reviewing even in this sense is however doubtful. Certainly, publishers do not feel it necessary to support the review pages heavily with advertising - their advertisements on a Saturday are easily outweighed by those for art and craft galleries, recitals and meetings. Their promotion does seem effective in helping to ensure a book is reviewed, but the constant reviewing by most papers of poetry does not seem to help sales in this area. Perhaps the saddest deficiency of Australian reviewing, however, is the failure of the literary pages to discover important new books and give them both the criticism and the publicity they deserve. Yet in this literary editors are at the mercy of the book distribution system, which ensures that overseas books are noticed in ~~the local~~ overseas papers long before they are available here, and of the Australian publicity machine, which seems more able to create a few celebrities among our authors than ensure them the sustained attention they need.

REVIEW CONTENT - AUSTRALIAN NEWSPAPERS - MONTH OF SEPTEMBER *

	1948				1958				1968				1978			
	Reviews	Books Reviewed	Aust. Books reviewed	Length Words	Reviews	Books Reviewed	Aust. Books Reviewed	Length Words	Reviews	Books Reviewed	Aust. Books Reviewed	Length Words	Reviews	Books Reviewed	Aust. Books Reviewed	Length Words
Advertiser (Adelaide)	20	22	10	200-400	27	38	8	200-600	17	22	11	300-900	16	22	7	350-700
Age (Melbourne)	20	27	1	300-1000	26	38	9	500-1000	31	35	15	300-1000	38	54	16	400-1200
Argus (Melb.) (ceased publication 1956)	7	17	2	120-800												
Australian (first pub. 1964)									27	31	10	600-1000	30	51	19	250-800
Canberra Times	Not	Surveyed			9	10	3	300-500	28	38	14	400-1200	38	46	13	400-800
‡ Courier-Mail (Brisbane)	4	9	2	450	‡ 4	11	2	750-800	8	9	6	300-600	9	9	3	300-600
‡ Mercury (Hobart)	4	4	1	450	† ‡ 10	11	6	200-	‡ 4	4	3	800-1000	-	-	-.	-
Sydney Morning Herald	18	26	5	250-1000	40	57	11	300-1000	26	33	11	400-1000	34	36	6	600-800
‡ West Australian	4	22	-	700	11	11	4	200-600	16	18	9	300-900	17	18	4	500-1000
Nat. Times (first pub. 1971)													17	20	12	150-2000
Nation Review (first pub. 1970)													6	7	3	550-2000

Reviews: number of reviews published - Summary round-ups of crime, children's fiction, paperbacks, science fiction, general discussion and brief notes excluded.

Books reviewed: number of books discussed in these reviews - excludes children's books and books mentioned in columns or brief notes.

Australian Books Reviewed: Books identified as Australian by virtue of author or content.

Length: A normal range of words in reviews - estimated. Exceptionally long and brief reviews excluded.

* There were five Saturdays in September, 1978. For comparability, the papers for the first four only were surveyed.

† Thursday editions. ‡ Single article each week, included reviews and notes.