

(Copy for John McLaren).
MCLAREN - PRAWER 2 - DOC 40

6th June, 1989

Dear Amirah,

Thanks for the donation and the sub, your general praise of the issue, but most especially thanks for your criticism of particulars. This I found valuable and I've already discussed with John (McLaren) the points you made. John may write separately to you. I thought a main failing was that we had only two stories. We'd had four set but space forced two out. There is such ^{an} extraordinary surge of new fiction of quality by Australians (especially by younger women writers) that, so far, Overland has failed to harvest the best. But we're working on it. I'm glad we're not a 'trendy' magazine - trends tend to be short-lived - but one drawback of this is that many of the 'new' writers, Marion Campbell, Marion Halligan, Matthew Condon, Zeny Giles, Margaret Coombs, etc. etc., are not sending their work to us.

Editing. Mea Culpa. Yes the Mulvaney interview should have carried a note that the work was part of a Historical Library. But I was ignorant of this at the time. Worse was the dropping of the usual info. about Brenda Niall's splendid book on Boyd. Your letter brought me up sharp. I couldn't believe it! Somewhere between first edit and final proofs this was lost. Gremlins.

The Fiction and Poetry Chronicles. You are not alone in your dislike of these features. The problem is difficult to address. The sheer quantity of Australian fiction of some quality which had been published in the last 18 months is a phenomenon. In my view there has been nothing like it before in the history of Aust. lit. I'm currently a judge for the N.B.C. 1989 Awards. There are 20 books which make serious claims to win the Fiction Award. Now none of us can read, closely and with alert attention, all of this. At least the quarterly chronicles of fiction and poetry provide a record and demonstrate major changes in method and content. There is a case for general mapping of this sort. Without such general statements a lot of good work would not be given any attention at all. Daniel and O'Hearn are both remarkable, I think, in being able to bring a general intellectual energy to so much work: I doubt that there are any two other writers in the country with their understanding of what's being written now. Even when their comments on particular books are brief there is no sense that their observations are superficial or cursory. And I think you will miss something of value in not reading Kevin Hart on poetry: his essay is more than a series of linked comments; he creates a unified critical context. I may not agree with some of his particular judgements but, clearly, this is a good mind at serious work.

n Reviews. The section which most disappointed you. With such

a flood of publication in these areas: history, fiction, poetry, women's studies, aboriginal studies, biography, what can a quarterly do, what place can we make for ourselves which is different from that of the week-end literary supplements and the monthlies like A.B.R.? What's the criteria for choosing one important historical work for review over another with equal claims on the mythical "intelligent general reader"? The newspaper lit. supplements now publish quite lengthy and authoritative reviews, so what's our role? We are moving ~~slowly~~ to a preference for attention to works, within Overland's general range of interests, which are ignored elsewhere? e.g., from the issue, no. 114, which disappointed you, Wendy Bacon on Bowman's The Captive Press, Selenitsch on Foss's Island In The Stream, McLaren on Altmann, Len Fox on Sendy's Ralph Gibson. This is to be supplemented in the general part of the magazine by long critical articles on particular writers e.g. 113 had D.R. Burns on Xavier Herbert and Peter Porter on Chris Wallace-Crabbe, 114 has Bruce Bennett on Peter Cowan and Wallace-Crabbe on Vin Buckley. And I hope, in the review section, there will be room from time to time for the capricious, even the excentric.

You don't like some particular reviewers in 114. Barry Jones. He was chosen because he has reviewed ADB in Overland for many years as particular volumes appear. A change of reviewer is not justified. Geoff Serle says that he usually gets some practical info. from Jones' reviews. Heseltine. I don't see how we could not have had a major literary historian review a major literary history. Much favourable comment has come in on this review. We certainly could not have ignored a book which is causing such controversy and which is aimed by Penguin at such a wide market. I agree with you about Seal's poor performance. I telephoned around to at least four authorities for advice. John asked Seal, supported by me, as all four advisers mentioned him. He let us down. We could have dropped the review and probably should have. On the other hand I wanted to note Factor's v. good book. And I agree with your comments on the review of the Mary Gilmore biog. I do send a great deal of stuff back for rewriting and revision but our situation has limitations: too much stuff, too few eyes and hands. I share your concern about the danger of developing an 'inbred quality' but really do try to defend ourselves by finding reviewers from a wide geographical range and from generalists as well as specialists. Naturally the generalists who write decent prose give priority to requests from the media lit. editors; the media pays much more.

Another thing; how does one person at one dining-room table contact all the publishers in Australia regularly for advance news of books to review? Yet if we delegate the choice of books to a group then we'll lose, at least I think we'll lose, a kind of editorial personality which should give individuality to the magazine.

Well, Amirah, of course the review section could be better and we ~~really~~ are working on it. Letters like yours are just what I need. I don't agree with some of your points but I've thought closely about what you say. I hope you can find time for another such letter after the next issue. What of your own writing? Anything for us?

Best wishes,