

Reviews

Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 230, Australian Writers, 1788–1914. Ed. Selina Samuels. Detroit: Gale, 2001, xx + 499pp.
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Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 260, Australian Writers, 1915–1950. Ed. Selina Samuels. Detroit: Gale, 2002, xxi + 510pp.
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ISBN 0787660043

Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 289, Australian Writers, 1950–1975. Ed. Selina Samuels. Detroit: Gale, 2004, xix + 347pp.
AU \$330
ISBN 0787668265

Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 325, Australian Writers, 1975–2000. Ed. Selina Samuels. Detroit: Gale, 2006, xix + 386pp.
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The four volumes of the Gale Group's enormous *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (DLB) that focus on Australian writers 1788–2000 represent a magnificent achievement for all contributors, but more particularly for the single editor of all four volumes, Dr Selina Samuels. Read as a single work they stand alongside such landmark volumes as H. M. Green's *A History of Australian Literature* (1961), *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* (1985), *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia* (1988), *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature* (2001), and *The History of the Book In Australia* (2001) series, in representing an outstanding and long-lasting print resource for the study of Australian literature. (All but the Green also represent Herculean tasks in the process of selecting, commissioning, collecting and editing contributions from multiple authors: as one who is a beginner at the professionally thankless role of editor, I stand in awe of Dr Samuels's accomplishment in both endurance and meticulous attention to detail; I caught only one editorial oversight, repeated information about

Andrew McGahan's partner on 325: 229 and 325: 230). And like all such monumental works, the four Australian volumes in the *Dictionary*, while multi-vocal and by definition delightfully contradictory, invite the reader to delineate how, at the turn of the twenty-first century, the field of Australian literature understands its present, its past and its possible futures: it will become a key work in the field of its own inquiry.

Even so, these volumes—each of which can be purchased individually—represent a new kind of resource in Australian literary studies, stemming from the generous space given to the life, work and critical reception of so many authors: 41 (1788-1914), 45 (1915-1950), 40 (1950-1975), 57 (1975-2000); a total of 183. Many of the entries are testimony to the expansion and professionalisation of scholarship in Australian literary history in the very few decades since works by Australians began appearing on university courses and in academic research; alongside the histories and companions mentioned above, and the Australian Academy Editions series, these volumes help realise a mid-twentieth-century dream of established Australian literary archives trawled by professional critics. The biographical approach seems to have enabled more detailed archival research, some of it quite new, to find its way into a work of criticism that aims, nonetheless, to provide an overview both of each writer's oeuvre and the field as a whole. This is not the least reason why the four volumes will become such a new and vital resource in the research and teaching of Australian literature, particularly outside the country. It is a characteristic underscored by a unique feature in the pantheon of Australian literary histories and companions: the inclusion of numerous images, it seems at least four or five per writer, including portraits, front covers, galley proofs, and manuscript pages. The result affirms the Advisory Board's introductory comment that "dust jackets . . . often document better than anything else the way in which an author's work was perceived in its own time" (230: xiv). There are potential theses just in discussing the evolution of the book in Australia as evinced in those images reproduced in these volumes.

I cannot but celebrate the inclusion of Australian writers in an American series, and the fact that the country is represented by four volumes divided according to significant dates in its own cultural history, as elucidated in Samuel's valuable and succinct introductions to each volume. In reviewing the *Cambridge Companion* in 2001, I sensed the difficulties presented by the demand to cover, in a few hundred pages, two centuries of an entire continent's literary output across all genres; this when other numbers in the series on British writing covered single genres in delineated periods, or even single authors. So too the (so far) 375-volumes of the *Dictionary of*

Literary Biography, growing since 1975, covers in detail American and British literature (note Volume 171: *Twentieth-Century American Sportswriters* and Volume 261: *British Fantasy and Science-Fiction Writers since 1960*), while also addressing sub-groupings among French, German, Canadian, Austrian, Latin-American, Caribbean, African, South Slavic, Italian, Spanish, Ancient Greek, Japanese, Russian, Ancient Roman, Norwegian and Irish writers, to name a few. If the dreams of Australian literature's first professionals are being realised, let us find new visions proper to our time: for a start, that this be the last occasion when national/chronological arrangement is considered sufficient for attempting a comprehensive critical account of writing produced in and about Australia. Will Australian authors be one day better served by precisely the organisational system rejected by the *DLB*'s Editorial Directors, Matthew J. Bruccoli and Richard Layman, and the project's advisory board: "a single alphabet method" (230: xiii)?

Nonetheless it is a system presumably manifest in the project's online version. I have found links to this only via libraries which control access: I am assuming members of those libraries that can afford subscription to the hard-copy series of this enormous undertaking are offered online access and searches which eradicate national boundaries. There can be no doubt this is the only way forward for such projects: the internet and such mega-products are made for one another, fused as the epitome of globalised academe. At the end of last year I attended a seminar by Dr Lawrence Goldman, editor of the UK's *Dictionary of National Biography* (*DNB*). The decision to make this other extraordinary resource an electronic one was made early and is highly beneficial to the ongoing project: as entries are updated the older version is retained in an accessible archive, replete with date/time of, and reasons for, the changes; what is more, as Dr Goldman observed, the "national" of the project's title reflects less the arrogance of "British" being understood, and more the need *not* to specify nation in the face of devolution, globalisation and the desire to include rather than exclude visitors, foreign commentators (even classical ones), expatriates, colonials, non-resident writers published in Britain and so on. As Goldman implied, *DNB* in fact spells the end of nation as a workable category. For its part, the *DLB* has recently ceased publishing in hard copy "the *DLB Yearbooks*, which update published entries and add new entries to keep the *DLB* current with contemporary activity" (230: xiii), leading me to assume a similar electronic archiving system and post-national search mechanism are or will be in place for the online version. (Presumably, too, this is why Volumes 230 and 260 have cumulative indexes but 289 and 325 do not.)

Each entry begins with a bibliography of the author in question, often including selected uncollected periodical publications. For earlier Australian writers the latter are particularly useful, underscoring the vital importance of journalism in Australia both to support writers financially and to augment the incipient field: here one suspects the influence of the American context where journalists and journalistic writing are respected as formative of, if not abidingly central to, literary culture. The inclusion often provides an instant snapshot of the socio-economic status of a writer, how dependent he or she was on the income provided by writing. Overall the effect underscores the importance of financial security for the production of literature, be it through regular publication, inherited wealth or, notably, a supportive partner. It throws into relief the importance of government recognition and subsidy of Australian writers in the golden years of such provision; entry after entry in the 1950–1975 volume in particular, notes the artistic impact of the Commonwealth Literary Fund or Literature Board grants. Before these, it is impossible to imagine Australia's indubitably great literature being produced by Henry Handel Richardson and Patrick White (given the encouragement of William Blake, perhaps we can add Christina Stead) were it not for their ability to commit themselves full-time to writing ostensibly unmarketable fare. The shadow of this fact lies in the unfortunate ends of others like Marcus Clarke, who had journalism up his sleeve but to little avail; to say nothing of the Gordon-Lawson-Brennan "tradition". Again and again writing emerges as something the men and women chronicled here cannot but produce, yet it so easily takes its toll in shortened lives, or in recurring observations by their biographers that the author began "drinking heavily": as you proceed through the volumes cumulative fates are enough to make you a teetotaler, if you still want to risk writing at all.

Yet outside chronicles of the matey school of mid-to-late twentieth-century Australian men's writing (all those blokes, excepting Louis Nowra, characterised as yarn-spinning footy- or cricket-lovers), the alcohol, nicotine, drugs and other pleasuring irrationalities critical to the writing process, are often concealed by the overall project's assertion that:

The most important thing about a writer is his writing. Accordingly, the entries in the *DLB* are career biographies, tracing the development of the author's canon and the evolution of his reputation. (230: xiii)

The dictum leads to a polite restraint more or less respected by all contributors. Partly for the same reason, one suspects, they are universally sympathetic to their subjects (meaning, also, controversial status can be downplayed, as for example, in Don Grant's entry on Mary Durack, 260: 106-15).

More pleasurable than intoxication, more intensely irrational, and more significant to the writing life, is an author's shifting sexuality: this must be a source of greatest fascination for a biographer at the very moment that negotiating its inscription within the career-biography brief seems impossible. Diverse entries resort to subtle implication, suggestive discretion, hilarious mismanagement and/or total evasion. What heart-ache, and inspiration, are elided in sentences politely phrased in the manner of "On return to Australia they were married. Children followed, then divorce". People "meet at parties" such that a marriage is peremptorily dissolved: meanwhile the sexual lives of Australia's literati that do not lead to a change of partner are tips of significant but clearly unspeakable icebergs.

It is extremely difficult not to see what is most concealed, then, as frequently a driving force in literary output. Granted, libel laws exclude the most vital gossip. And given the struggle by so many of these writers to explore throughout their careers the complex, shifting and strange borders between lived experience and fiction, perhaps we cannot expect those charged with giving us a public career in limited pages to venture into speculation on the significance of sex lives. Still, I wondered, in an undisciplined moment, how many of the entrants had had sex with one another, and with what result. The more the collective effect of the career-biographies lent an aura of respectability to Australian literature overall, the more absences of histories of desire seemed to matter. Admittedly, where the writer has himself or herself explored sexuality through "semi-autobiographical" writing (see, for example, Rowan Young's entry on Mandy Sayer, 325: 283-88), there appeared to be some scope for reflection on desire and Australian writing. At the same time, elsewhere, a writer's downright refusal to bring life-history into critical analysis could lead to self-conscious deliberation on the conundrums presented by a literary biography's aims (satisfyingly in the case of Fleur Diamond's entry on the incomparable J. S. Harry, 325: 141-45).

An overall effect of such respectful aims is to impede the recovery of something that interests me personally, the queer history of Australian literature. Two same-sex "long-time companions" are photographed in the volumes, balancing elsewhere wedding photos and prolific children; but this is not really the point. Nagging problems with the referencing of queer sexuality in the volumes lie not with individual contributors but enable one to identify the restraints of the career biography as formulated in the Gale series as a whole. To focus on the men, this queer reader imputes potential queer readings of Martin Boyd's literary output, for example, in a dextrous entry by Susan Lever (one of several); I cite the output and leave the man. Can these,

should these, only ever be implicit? Randolph Stow scores “an uncomfortable sexual awakening” (260: 387), whatever that is. On the whole Mary Lord’s 1993 biography of Hal Porter, discussed with insight in David McCooney’s entry on the writer, is a foil to the general *DLB* approach—its existence also helps McCooney out of a tight spot—but it is hardly the answer. Where the *DLB* gets explicit the effect can be nightmarish. Patrick White attempts to deny “a youth and early manhood indelibly marked by his homosexuality” (260: 401), experiences the “far-reaching” effect of “sexual deviance”, gains insight but feels “flawed” by “transgressing sexual norms” and recognises “there was much in common between casual, predatory homosexual coupling and prostitution” (260: 402). Casual, predatory homosexual coupling? Algernon, fetch the smelling salts! Apart from anything else it’s causing me to imagine “casual, predatory heterosexual coupling” after meetings of the Fellowship of Australian Writers and wonder why it hasn’t been mentioned in so many words?

Let me take the occasional startling acknowledgement—and/or general evasion—of queer male sexuality in these volumes as representative of their general treatment of desire: if not left out altogether nor negatively imputed, sexuality is presented as a big thing “discovered”, defining the subject one way once and for all, and first and foremost as exceptionally beholden to desire—Norman Lindsay and Xavier Herbert, of course, but a whole raft of women writers—as if only the “non-normative” writers were desiring subjects in idiosyncratic, ever-changing, and vitally significant ways in terms of the literature they produce(d). Thus, one could argue the occasional evocation of sexuality in these volumes is compatible with the overall project’s outcome: the pinioning of Australian writers’ lives, and the delineation of Australian writing, through an articulation of fixed and distinctive characteristics within a standardised range of categories: nationality, class, gender and race. (An early paragraph in every entry mentions the writer’s date and place of birth, and the nationality and occupations of both parents, if known.) So, whereas late-twentieth-century practices and theories have enabled writing by colonial authors, by non-nationalists, by expatriates (at long last), by non-Anglo-Celtic and by Indigenous Australian authors to be admirably incorporated in the selection of entrants, queer theory’s insistence on a queer tradition, and its discursive struggles with the meaning of desire, have not yet impacted fully on the writing of this type of literary biography. Might not speculation, at least, on the ever-changing function of desire in a writer’s life—surely *The Twyborn Affair* marks a turning-point, for example, in White’s self-inscription as a desiring subject—bend without breaking the generic form dictated by this project, offering us insights that even the

literature itself cannot afford (particularly that produced pre-1970)? Is this a twenty-first-century dream?

Don't get me wrong: all the pinning down is immensely useful. Some of the best entries begin with magisterial and/or pregnant summations. To pluck wonderful examples from the first Australian volume: Alan Lawson's "Barbara Baynton has a small oeuvre and a large reputation" (230: 27); Christopher Lee's "Henry Lawson is the most famous and influential Australian literary figure of the nineteenth century" (230: 218); Susan Lever's "Henry Handel Richardson wrote novels that are among the most ambitious and intellectual ever written by an Australian" (230: 313); Michael Ackland's "Henry Savery's was a life rich in potential moral lessons" (230: 337); and Patricia Clarke's "In her lifetime in the second half of the nineteenth century, Tasma was a famous woman" (230: 366). Overall, having read these volumes far more closely, and with greater fascination, than anticipated when I took on this review, I feel my knowledge of Australian literary studies is better contextualised than it has ever been. At the same time, I feel the experience of writing in Australia has been strangely falsified through the nature of the project that sets out to capture it.

Another way in which these volumes are immensely successful is the summaries they provide of major, if not all, works by the author in question. This not only quickly fills in gaps in your knowledge but also inspires and directs new readings. In fact the volumes evoke thousands of projects, revealing new threads and confirming older suspicions in the rich text of Australian literary history: the brilliance and critical importance of Australian Indigenous writers (though, through the privileging of multiple authorship, these are under-represented); the importance for so many non-Aboriginal writers of attempting to negotiate colonial history and contemporary Aboriginality (they have attempted extraordinary and myriad ways); the importance of and/or struggle with Catholicism for so many writers; the long-standing inspiration of Leftist thinking; the ebullience and also the pathos of high aestheticism; the perpetual dead-ended-ness of blokey writing; how meanly expatriate writers have been treated; how often literary prizes have rescued careers in the nick of time but caused immense and often unnecessary critical angst; how frequently writers (principally women writers) have had to negotiate conflicts between parenthood and a brilliant career; the list goes on. Most entries guide further reading to take up such threads, concluding not only with references to scholarship mentioned in the entry proper, but also published interviews, biographies, bibliographies and (most importantly) the location of the writer's papers.

The most excellent entries are full-bodied essays in their own right. I want to cite the entire first volume. Some non-exhaustive highlights from subsequent volumes: Maryanne Dever's efforts justify the only double entry in the collection (Marjorie Barnard and Flora Eldershaw, 260: 3-13), articulating and further supporting the belated recognition of *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* as a masterpiece (1947/1983); the partisanship of all the biographers creates fascinating reading across Nadia Wheatley's Charmian Clift (260: 37-44) and Josephine Jill Kinnane's George Johnston (260: 169-78); Peter Fitzpatrick (260: 116-23) is deft with the ambiguities forged in the disjunction between Louis Esson's pioneering status and actual literary achievement (and an image from 1922's *The Woman Tamer* augurs better for production values than history tells); Julian Croft puts critical reception to excellent use, contrasting that of his subject, Robert D. Fitzgerald and Kenneth Slessor (260: 124-32); Xavier Herbert's life, in Frances de Groen's entry, is like a politically negative imprint of Dymphna Cusack's (with whom I am enlightened to learn he had "an abortive affair") but is equally extraordinary (260: 151-61); Sharon Clarke on Sumner Locke Elliot boasts clarity and insight (289: 71-77); Maureen Clarke negotiates the life of Mudrooroo with dexterity (289: 168-74), and I am relieved to read he "continues to write"; Peter Pierce's writing on Thomas Keneally is admirably assured (289: 180-89); Peter Fitzpatrick beautifully captures the thrills and disappointments of Ray Lawler's career (289: 207-13); I thoroughly enjoyed Komninos Zervos on π.ο. (325: 260-65); Bruce Bennett was as entertaining as his subject, Clive James (325: 164-71); Alan Lawson more than justifies his identification of Frank Moorhouse (289: 223-31) as the ideal "representative figure around whom to write an account of the writer's life in Australia during the last half of the twentieth century". Lawson's entry is so fine not least because this topic is closest to the *DLB's* aims overall, but I also suspect the critical status of Moorhouse's writing is a good way from its peak.

Occasional authors are surprise entries, and naturally the final volume will be the most contested. Courting greater controversy are the missing persons, some of whose absence can only be explicable for logistical reasons, notably those identified by Samuels herself in the introduction to Volume 260: Dulcie Deamer, Lesbia Harford, Eve Langley and Kylie Tennant. In the first volume I missed Bennelong; as author of the oldest extant record of Aboriginal writing in English he deserved an entry which would also furnish an opportunity for reflection on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writing by Aboriginal men and women, none of it in traditional literary forms, nor responsive to traditional Western literary biography. Manning Clark might have appeared as our most literary historian. I particularly noticed Germaine

Greer was missing in action despite her name recurring as an influence in a number of other entries. (Peter Porter and Clive James feature in Volumes 289 and 325 respectively.) Among technically innovative and influential writers I was surprised not to find David Brooks. *ALS* Gold Medal-winner Laurie Duggan warranted an entry. J. M. Coetzee might just have snuck in; perhaps the post-2000 success of *Gould's Book of Fish* also explains the absence of Richard Flanagan. Given some other appearances, popular writers Colleen McCullough and Bryce Courtney deserved mention. I am sure we have only just begun: everyone will have an opinion, as imputed by Samuels's justifiably defiant dismissal of the disgruntled reader to the further reading lists that conclude Volumes 289 and 325. I do not want any of my reflections to detract from the great scholarly achievement the publication of these four volumes represent.

Before reading these lives, I would have invited Watkin Tench, Marcus Clarke, Patrick White and Christina Stead to my ideal back-from-the-dead Australian literary dinner party: after reading these lives I would add Dymphna Cusack.

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