

**Michael Farrell. *Writing Australian Unsettlement: Modes of Poetic Invention 1796–1945*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015. 234 pp.**

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This is important work. It's a rollick and a good read and, importantly, it takes us where we wouldn't ordinarily or otherwise be going. It doesn't necessarily take us the way we'd want to go, but then, which worthwhile book does? The important thing is that the journey is worth making.

In these pages we visit a challenging array (not to say assemblage) of Australian colonial texts: Ned Kelly's 'Jerilderie Letter,' a letter of Bennelong's, an especially non-native text from a Chinese miner incarcerated in a (doubly) Victorian mental institution (outsider writing before the fact). There are travelling diaries and drovers' journals, unexpected drawings and Aboriginal life writing composed for the benefit of A.O. Neville, notorious Protector of Aborigines. Cosying up to the canon a little, we have some Dorothea Mackellar, some Christopher Brennan and some Charles Harpur—but in every case, it's the stuff you wouldn't know or expect. Defamiliarising, one way or another.

Farrell's starting point is a challenge 'to listen' set by Phil Mead in his 2008 study, *Networked Language* (in several ways, a work presaging this): to listen, in other words, to voices that would not otherwise be heard. The process of drawing attention to those voices frames a critique of the canon and in particular of the canonising anthology and its role in Australian letters. Farrell notes the irony that the image of Ned Kelly as a writer is more disruptive than the image of him as a bushranger. This is the observation of the work in a nutshell. It's all about unsettling us, as in we-the-readers of ozlit. Very particularly it's about unsettling the kind of text list you might come up with if you worked on Tony Abbott and friends' assumption that culture in Australia began in 1788 with white patriarchal authority.

The book as a whole is, in a sense, an extended pun on the idea of settlement negated, on the idea of un-settlement and/or de-settlement and anti-settlement sentiment. The punning is the kind of thing you should expect when poets write theory. The book is littered with poet's fancies, many of which are fun. Nor is the ghost of Gilles Deleuze ever very far. And he's definitely one you want inside the tent pissing out. An ever-helpful sprite. Whether or not 'unsettlement,' the particular key neologism in the picture, is needed in the vocabulary of Australian cultural/literary studies, I leave to the reader to judge. Here's how Farrell positions his idea:

Unsettlement takes place regardless of sentiment or intention, and, conversely, is not guaranteed by antisettlement sentiment (such as might be found in the poems of Henry Lawson, for example). It is effected through writing practice: through writing in terms of other literacies; through reinventing writing and genre; and through material location.

The settlement/unsettlement thing is a little *heimlich/unheimlich* for me personally, a little close to the bone. Listening to the tanks fill as I type this review, in yet a next global-warming induced

weather event, in fact I'm happy that the weather's come. We were getting a little low. Of course you don't want too much weather, said Hanrahan. Ambivalences beget ambivalences. I scribble these musings as a recovering academic, living on a bushy block, a few hours from the city on the NSW mid-north coast. A century ago—when the sharpest thing available was an axe—there would have been very few trees within cooe of where my house now leans. The cows got hot but they had plenty to graze on. Not now. I'm told that in the day (as they say today) there was a bloke whose board and keep for most of his life was keeping the trees off the (now well re-forested) hill across the river from my place. I rejoice in his failure. Less cows now and since I got here about thirty years ago a forest has grown up around me. Pretty effortless on my part. You just have to let it grow. I do worry they don't burn off enough early spring any more. Me and Hanrahan, we worry about the summer fires. Still, my settlement here is a kind of unsettlement. The old works go under. And yet I make myself at home. I write about the place obsessively, daily, and have done for years. But in the sixty thousand years my species may have been wandering through here, I—should I say, my musings—will be fortunate to survive as a punctuation mark. Minor literature is what I commit to here.

Throughout *Writing Australian Unsettlement* Farrell obsesses about punctuation, and, on reflection, it turns out to be a reasonable obsession. Punctuation has certainly been a class act in Australia. Punctuation and standardised spelling are symptoms of a Victorian imperial mindset, getting the world into neat little settled (read, conquered) boxes. The tyranny of the conventional in the literary as well as the literal sense. It's interesting when people don't follow the rules and whether they know them or not. Perhaps we should be paying more attention to those not following the rules of writing? I think we're going to have to whether we like it or not.

A little too thesis-like in parts (and for reasons not hard to guess), one risk of Farrell's project is tautology, along these lines: culture, of its nature, is essentially unsettling, in the sense that it works by surprising expectation. This is what a story worth reading does, this is what every working poem does. The fact that in Australian letters down through the ages not so much might have been managed in the way of surprise need not detract from the principle. Fortunately Farrell does surprise. Another risk (and for anyone reading for the surprises) is in over-reading the fragments selected, the risk of over-reading for instance the possibility of a resistance in a text. Perhaps though one has to over-read in order to get to the possible of what was not noticed before? There can be something disingenuous in over-reading deliberate meaning into the literary musings of one so much less literate than oneself (as a number of Farrell's subjects in this book are). Other things trouble me here and there. Chapter 5 begins with a bold echo of Malcolm Fraser: 'Australia was never meant to be fun. It was designed to be a prison . . .' Properly historicise Matthew Flinders's (1804) neologism (not published till 1814, not adopted till 1824) and you cannot draw this conclusion. Chapter 6, in part on the Ngarla songs, might have benefited from consultations with Aboriginal language specialists. It reads as if the input of a linguist were missing. But these are little things.

The book is worth reading, not because of the slightly over-hammered argument (something to be expected between these kinds of covers), but because it takes us where we wouldn't have thought of going if we hadn't been taken there.

And on that journey we question a lot of things that need to be questioned—about cultural hegemony and star systems in Australian letters. Principally about what's worth reading.

Remember Bloom's bland dictum about how much good stuff there is—'who reads must choose'? Fact is, who reads gets a lot of their choosing done for them. Frankly I'm happier having Farrell doing some of the choosing compared with what's being served elsewhere. The question begged along the way is why our language and literature and their future ought to be owned by cultural capitalists when in fact we have a range of voices to hear, if we'll just make the effort to listen (?)

Kit Kelen, University of Macau