

## **Australian Literary Criticism 1950–1995**



# 'Sinister Signs of Professionalism'? Literary Gang Warfare in the 1950s and 60s

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In the 1950s, when academics began to take an increasingly professional interest in discussions of the national literature, the field largely belonged to nationalist-minded, left-leaning liberal intellectuals such as A.A. Phillips, Vance Palmer, and Stephen Murray-Smith, as well, of course, as an increasingly interested group of writers and cultural workers involved with the Communist Party of Australia (CPA). Within a decade the academics, frequently fortified with old world qualifications and a confidently specific critical practice, were shifting the paradigms in which the national literature was discussed and negotiating authoritative access to the publishing and editing networks through which Australian writing was produced and received. In this way the professional critical discourse of the academics was to effectively disenfranchise the social interests of the liberal-nationalist critics in general and the political concerns of the CPA in particular. This process of critical and institutional negotiation, as a number of critics have now pointed out, was significantly overdetermined by both the Cold War ideological struggles that transected Australian society in the fifties and the related internal developments of an expanding professional discipline within a growing university system.

John Docker traces the theoretical inspirations behind the professional practices of the academics to different forms of British Leavisism and American New Criticism and he argues that this brought about an attention to the text that effectively excluded context as a determinant of meaning. An interesting feature of Docker's own approach is his relatively early use of Michel Foucault's work on institutional power to show how the epistemological desires of a professional discipline enabled, but also restricted the emerging discourse on Australian literature. More recently, Leigh Dale has revisited the institutional politics of the university to argue that in the 1950s and 1960s Australian literature entered the academy under the 'disdainful scrutiny' of an increasingly professionalised discipline righteously focused upon the Literature of the 'home' country. Both the popular and the local sociological interest in Australian writing were seen as threats to the level of culture nurtured within the discipline of English. Academic interest in the local product could therefore be a dangerous career move and it often protected itself with a patronising obsession for evaluation. Using a superior culture imbibed from the

best in English Literature, academic critics could accept a responsibility for the long and arduous labour of raising the tone of the national product and its local audience (Dale 127).

The influential role in the development of a list in Australian literary criticism for Oxford University Press of the Oxford trained linguist and critic, Grahame Johnston, made him an important figure in this process (Eyre 47–49, 55–60; Dale 102–03). *Australian Literary Criticism*, Johnston's inaugural 1962 contribution to Oxford's list, is now something of a monument to the period's earnest interest in canonisation. Describing it at the time as 'a co-operative endeavour to arrive at a canon of the more valuable and enduring Australian writers', Johnston took pains to point out that his evaluative concerns represented a deliberate rejection of the 'lack of discrimination' that characterised the work of the nationalists (vii). *Australian Literary Criticism* was to be a set of 'serious appraisals of Australian writing ... in which interpreters of intelligence and taste ... markedly advance understanding and judgement' (vii).

The deliberately provocative tone of Johnston's introduction is indicative of the critical tensions at this time, but it is a little reductive to see these tensions as simply between conservative academics and left-leaning liberal intellectuals. In fact the critical reception of the anthology of criticism identifies a range of positions which were to shape the course of criticism into the 70s. A.A. Phillips in *Meanjin* saw the narrow and exclusive aspirations of the collection as a disturbing sign of the current academic trend in criticism and noted that the best criticism comes from creative writers themselves (220–25). Ian Mair in *Overland* also saw the essays in the collection as insular and dull (54–5). The flack was not entirely from outside the academy, however, for while Leonie Kramer, writing in the *Bulletin*, was happy to endorse Johnston's canonical approach, she pointed to the narrowness of our critical world and the poor writing of the academics (36). John Barnes used *Westerly* to lament the collection's lack of interest in the literary (but not the social) contexts of the texts. Drawing approvingly upon F.R. Leavis he argued that criticism required an 'awareness of the particular work in relation to the larger whole' (83). Johnston's selection is governed by a choice of literary texts and not by a sense of the issues, methods and problems relevant to Australian criticism. In short, Johnston's anthology asserts a model of criticism where it should be charting the different historical trends in our criticism (81–5). D.C. Muecke uses the professional high ground of *Southern Review* to look down upon Australian literature and its university critics. For Muecke, Johnston's aspirations are pretentious and his contributors complacent amateurs (109–112). It was left to W. M. Maidment to point out the relativity of value and its separateness from its object. The decision to close criticism to sociological and historical approaches but not to metaphysical and moral interpretations is arbitrary and what was needed was an informed debate on criteria. Maidment called for some attention to a theory of criticism (20–41). No one seemed to hear him.

There is enough here to begin to trace some of the important themes and characteristic strategies of the debates within Australian letters in the 1960s. The opposition between evaluative critics and the nationalists was quickly overlaid by a

stand off between professional academic critics and the men of letters who previously carried the field. Old rivalries between the Adelaide modernists, Melbourne nationalists, and sundry other literary journalists were subsumed by their growing hostility towards a patronising new enemy; the men of letters rallied to contest the relevance of professional practices.

The battle-lines are well drawn by two reviews to Geoffrey Dutton's 1964 collection of essays, *The Literature of Australia*. Dutton was an academic at the University of South Australia in the early sixties and had been engaged as a commissioning editor for Penguin's new Australian operations. In preparing his collection of essays he invited a diverse group of critics in a conscious effort to avoid the 'literary gang warfare' current in Australia' (Dutton, *Rare Bird* 78; *Out in the Open* 275). This eclecticism allowed the reviewers to pick off their own targets.

John Colmer, an academic from the University of Adelaide notices the different critical methods but sees the resulting duplications and contradictions as poor planning. 'Literary criticism in Australia,' he writes, 'is still a very eclectic, amateurish affair ... lacking any fully developed scale of values, literary sophistication, method or discipline' (67, 68). Colmer approves of A. D. Hope's view that Australia lacked a masterpiece that might establish a standard and an audience that might appreciate it and hence insists upon the necessity of international comparative work. Judith Wright's unfavourable comparison of Brennan with Rilke in the anthology is singled out for praise, but most of her fellow contributors are found wanting. The academics H. J. Oliver (Professor of English, UNSW) and David Bradley (a lecturer at Monash) are given honorary mentions, and the reviewer tells us that the 'best criticism transcends technical mastery and is the product of imaginative insight, taste and literary style' (70).

The broadcaster and journalist, Clemment Semmler was in agreement with Colmer on the importance of critical style but he wasn't as sanguine about the academics' ability to serve it up. Semmler's guide is not Hope but Dutton, whom he quotes approvingly. Dutton's view that 'the symptoms of academic criticism "are alarming enough in Australia"', and that the more enduring criticism is that of "working men of letters who (bear) themselves the scars of other people's criticisms and the burden of their own failures"', is for Semmler, 'depressingly borne witness to in this collection' (Semmler, 'Writers on Writers' 65). The best studies for Semmler are by non-academic practising writers who are free from professional jargon. Wright's chapter again gains the top posy followed by Douglas Stewart, Stephen Murray-Smith and then Chris Wallace-Crabbe.

It is a point of some interest that both Colmer and Semmler picked out Judith Wright's essay for marked praise – more so because they both approved of her comparative focus. Colmer's approval as I said above was related to an insistence to maintain standards by measuring Australian material against international practise. Semmler seems rather to have enjoyed Wright's use of the comparison to condemn Brennan's writing for academic abstractions that deny him a fuller life experience, more successful poetry and importantly for the journalist, an audience. Wright's view of Brennan is Semmler's view of the academics and their criticism.

Wright's reputation as a critic waxes in the sixties with many commentators in and outside the academy praising her as one of the country's finest. Her reputation is partly due to the features of her critical practise, but it also has a lot to do with the particular authority available to her as a distinguished poet and the way this critical position was able to elude the rivalries between the academics and the literary journalists. The positive reception of Oxford University Press' 1965 publication of *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry* can be seen, in part, as a function of Wright's ability to accommodate the disagreements of the time. Vivian Smith in *Australian Literary Studies* saw her as an 'undogmatic and wide ranging critic' owing 'no obvious allegiances to any of the reigning critical methods and modes' and he marked for especial praise 'the way [her book] places the authors ... in an historical perspective while not losing sight of the 'international' literary standards by which they are to be judged' (147). Grahame Johnston in the *Australian* is quick to note Wright's disapproval of academics and the lack of detailed critical attention to texts but he is fulsome on the quality of her prose (Johnston, 'Poets in a Divided World'). As the general editor of Oxford's list Johnston must have had some editorial involvement in this book; although Frank Eyre seems to have been responsible for its commissioning. In *Southern Review*, Dorothy Green differed from Johnston in approving of a critic who takes poets seriously as thinkers rather than obsessing with textual technicalities (70–76). Leonie Kramer in *Australian Book Review* praises the lack of academic jargon in Wright's criticism, its freedom from the 'affectation of neutrality', and her artist's sympathy for the 'poet's problems'. She soon moves on, however, to take issue with the way her preoccupations distort some of the poets under consideration and in particular her suspicion of the 'intellectual critic' (Kramer, 'Judith Wright' 159).

Wright's concern over the rise of professional criticism is partly a concern for its effects upon literary production and it was shared by A.D. Hope, whose essay 'Literature and the Universities' was republished in *The Cave and the Spring* in the same year as Wright's study. In his preface to this collection of essays Hope was careful to claim a poet's authority rather than an academic one and it is from this position that he takes issue with the internationally expanding discipline of literary studies. For Hope, the rapid expansion and professionalisation of the academy has led to the domestication of the creative writer according to the critical protocols of academic critics. 'Faced with an enormous demand from an obviously inadequate wild supply of literature', he argues, 'the universities are taking over literature and regulating production, breeding their own writers and standardising their own supply; soon we may see the poet-on-campus ... in much the same way as we go to the zoo to see the last few bison in captivity, the last few genuine wild writers preserved as interesting relics of a past age' (173).

This all sounds very funny now of course, but it is illustrative of the complexity of the disagreements arising between writers, journalists, and the professional critics over the functions of criticism at the time. So important did these disagreements seem to people involved with the national literature that the University of New England Summer School put together a symposium in 1965 to investigate the problem.

The inside dust jacket blurb of the book that resulted from this talkfest describes its contents:

A group of writers, critics, publishers and readers ... talked of the environment which our literature creates and from which it must also derive its strength – of its ideological, cultural and intellectual background – of the depth and kind of criticism which it has to meet – of the means of its dissemination through books, broadcasting, schools – of some of the barriers embedded in the laws of obscenity ... and generally of the subsoil which our society provides for creative writing to take root and to flourish or to wither. (Semmler and Whitelock)

Judith Wright writes in the collection on Australian poetry, Max Harris on conflicts in Australian intellectual life, Clemment Semmler contributes an essay on Australian literary criticism, and H.W. Piper, Professor of English at Macquarie University, writes on academic criticism. Other contributors included Frank Hardy, Lloyd O'Neil, Colin Roderick, Bruce Sutherland, and Andrew Fabinyi.

In his introduction, Semmler feels the need to defend the proceedings' 'too great a concern with literary criticism' on the grounds that

Australian literature is clearly at that interesting stage where distinctions need to be drawn between academic and journalistic criticism, or between the critical ploys of academics and writers. After all, integrity and energy of response in literary criticism are very rare; just what course have our critics taken over the years ... Is it true that there is a situation in this regard, as Max Harris maintains, 'unique to Australia' which 'leads one to the conclusion that there is at least a case for anti-academicism, and that the current rumblings could presage a change in critical climate which will lead younger poets ... is there a vicious critical circle of Hope endlessly on McAuley, McAuley on Buckley, Buckley on Hope, and Dr Leonie Kramer on them all' that needs to be broken? ... perhaps it may be argued that some of those who have contributed to this volume confuse literature with morality, or with political or social action, but at least they do not fall into the greater confusion of imagining that the response to literature has nothing to do with the pressure of these things upon it. (Semmler, 'Introduction' xi-xii)

Wright's essay reiterates her concern that the intellectualism that results from the shift of poetic production to the universities will see professional criticism and its theories interfere with the personal imagination and life experience she sees as essential to poetry (Wright, 'Inheritance and Discovery' 1-15). The rise to power of academic poet-critics is also a theme of Max Harris's essay. For Harris the creatively stimulating debates of the forties between the left, the Jindiworobaks, the modernists and the classicists have been terminated by a new monopoly on

criticism by professional academics. These professionals have elevated intellect and technique over idiom, language and sensibility to the detriment of Australian poetry. Professional criticism is compartmentalised and thwarts the cross-fertilisation required for innovation. Academics have a closed shop mentality that leads to a dullness not shared by the jack-of-all-trades whose earnest concern for the readership leaves things open (Harris 16–33). Following on from Harris, Semmler moves in for the kill. The literary journalist's concern for their ordinary readership is elevated over the coteries that service the professionals. Citing Helen Gardner's *The Business of Criticism* he notes the 'sinister signs of professionalism' that mark academic practise: esoteric unintelligible vocabulary, quarrels and feuds. 'Within our universities', he argues, 'literary criticism is threatening to become little more than just another academic specialism; often designed to dazzle the layman or to consolidate a professional position' (Semmler, 'Some Aspects' 65).

In the wake of all this anti-academic heat it is perhaps not surprising that the representative of the professional academics appears to surrender the critical ground to others. 'Now an academic is not primarily a critic', Piper writes, 'he is concerned with scholarship, that is, with understanding, explaining and indeed annotating the whole literary tradition of a culture' (81). Piper's concluding summary of the scholarly, teaching and critical roles available to academics represent a neat summary of the professional position. Academics can 1) continue the scholarly examination of the literary past (ala Gerry Wilkes); 2) teach Australian literature as a necessary subsidiary of English literature so as to protect taste and judgement; but also 3) to teach it in its own cultural context so that intellectual debate in this country will include literary perspectives, and 4) consolidate and map recent literary territory through their criticism – though it is noted that creative writers make the best critics. A.D. Hope's 'Standards in Australian Literature' looms as a fairly large shadow behind Piper's treatment of his subject and identifies the chief academic objective as the creation of an intellectual class that will enable professional criticism to encounter a readership outside the sandstone walls of the universities.

Revisiting the influential list that Grahame Johnston put together for Oxford University Press from the early sixties into the seventies it is easy to see the influence of the arguments put forward by the literary journalists and the creative writers in this decade. Clemment Semmler's *20th Century Australian Literary Criticism* in 1967, John Barnes' *The Writer in Australia* in 1969 and then Chris Wallace-Crabbe's *The Australian Nationalists* in 1971 follow Johnston's controversial 1962 collection. The repeated warnings against specialisation, jargon, and professional knowledge targeted the relationship between academics and creative writers as well as that between academics and the wider public sphere. The suspicion of expertise and professional authority on show in the sixties has striking resonances with Helen Trinca's public denouncement of the academy's new penchant for the esoteric languages of French Theory in the early 1990s as well the contemporary moment's suspicious association of the consultant expert and an isolated and arrogant government caught in the technocratic and economic hype of globalisation (See Trinca and the ensuing debate in the *Australian* in August 1992 and the essays



in *Two Nations*). Graeme Turner's explication of the ways in which esoteric professionalism has helped disenfranchise academic critics in media debates concerned with the character and function of our public culture suggests that some of the lessons learnt by professional critics in the sixties will need to be relearned if academics are to effectively contest Australian culture in the new millennium (Turner).

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