Nicholas Birns, *Contemporary Australian Literature: A World Not Yet Dead*

Jean-François Vernay

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ces/5663>
DOI: 10.4000/ces.5663
ISSN: 2534-6695

Publisher

SEPC (Société d'études des pays du Commonwealth)

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 April 2016
Number of pages: 139-140
ISSN: 2270-0633

Electronic reference

Jean-François Vernay, "Nicholas Birns, *Contemporary Australian Literature: A World Not Yet Dead*", *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* [Online], 38.2 | 2016, Online since 06 April 2021, connection on 01 July 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ces/5663> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.5663>

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REFERENCES

Nicholas Birns. *Contemporary Australian Literature: A World Not Yet Dead*. Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2015. 252 p. ISBN: 978-1-74332-436-3. \$ 30 AU

- 1 In 2007, editors Nicholas Birns and Rebecca McNeer contributed to the international visibility of Australian literature with a comprehensive array of works illustrative of the growth of a flourishing Antipodean literature, entitled *A Companion to Australian Literature since 1900*, and released by American publisher Camden House. With his new monograph, Birns paradoxically takes the globalisation of Australian Studies one step further by having it published by Sydney University Press. Birns, an American scholar, resists the nationalist sentiment which is more often than not attached to Australian literary history. He does so by discussing the writings of Australian authors (with the exception of New Zealand / Canadian contemporary novelist Eleanor Catton) within the wider international context, and in terms of the history of ideas he synthesized in *Theory After Theory: An Intellectual History of Literary Theory from 1950 to the Early 21st Century* (Broadview, 2010). Otherwise put, shadows of literary theory and cultural studies pervasively hover over this monograph.
- 2 Though *Contemporary Australian Literature* has the same format as John McLaren's *Australian Literature: An Historical Introduction* (1989), its approach is radically different. Similar to Geordie Williamson's *The Burning Library: Our Great Novelists Lost and Found* (2012) which is quite frequently referred to, Birns' monograph is organised around a cluster of internationally high-profile Australian novelists such as Christina Stead, Elizabeth Harrower, Thomas Keneally, Patrick White, John Coetzee, Peter Carey, and

Hannah Kent, whom Birns copiously discusses while drawing analogies with the fate and content of other Australian books and writers.

- 3 The subtitle of this transnational project, *A World Not Yet Dead*, is an allusion to the much discussed demise of Australian literature and the rarefaction of its teaching. Taken in a global context, this waning would perhaps be associated with the worldwide crisis sweeping through the beleaguered humanities, but locally, such flagging interest was bound to be interpreted as a sure sign that Australian literature needed to be resurrected¹ and Australia's national literary heritage saved in the face of student dollar-focused academic policies embracing the latest trends.²
- 4 Ironically enough, Australian literary historiography was born in the eyes of an external observer, if one is to date it back to 1856 with the publication in the *Journal of Australasia* of an essay entitled "The Fiction Fields of Australia" written by German-born journalist Frederick Sinnett. This begs the question whether external commentators would have a ringside view of Australian fiction or not. Perhaps not, if we are to believe Nicholas Birns, for whom "despite the Internet, to work in Australian literary studies outside Australia is still to be at a decided logistical and informational disadvantage" (viii).
- 5 Another question which may be worthwhile raising is whether this outside gaze is a specifically American one. By trying to resist ill-fitting labels, Birns is adamant that his academic monograph is no "'American take on Australian Literature.' One can be an Australianist literary scholar from anywhere in the world. The national adjective applies to the body of literature or to a national horizon of reading, not necessarily to the critical apparatus used to study it. This book is definitely from a non-Australian perspective, but only incidentally from a specifically American one" (23). To some extent, Birns may be right in the sense that his themed collection of essays is reminiscent of many traits traditionally ascribed to Australian literary historiography: a rounded survey of literary development; the selection – and therefore tacit suppression or non-inclusion – of specific authors reflecting the literary historian's idiosyncrasies; comparisons with writers from other backgrounds; cogent arguments within a coherent historical framework; the lumping of diverse literary personalities and their sometimes eclectic works into convenient categories, to which Birns adds his own: modernity vs. late modernity; home vs. abroad, *récit* vs. total fiction, winners vs. losers (within the purview of neoliberalism), to name a few.
- 6 The author's concern "with the economic philosophy of neoliberalism" (ix) brings him to audaciously analyse some books in terms of page count, brevity and bulkiness. His personal approach, which occasionally segues into memoir (in chapters 1 and 6), is attuned with a long-standing academic tradition in literary studies which tends to favour against-the-grain interpretations of literature. Perhaps the section that stands out as the most iconoclastic is the one discussing affects in literature, a term Birns interprets somewhat creatively when he associates idealism to rancour and concern.
- 7 Pedagogically, I believe a good critical book to be like a classroom lesson in which you would find: something old, something new, something fun and something to remember. There is no denying that the first two and last elements can be ticked off from the checklist: though Birns – like most literary historians – is going over grounds that have already been covered, he manages to think outside the box by applying tenets of neoliberalism to Australian literary studies and one learns much from this book, not least from its valuable discussions of the American reception of Australian fiction. Fun

is perhaps not to be expected as this book was certainly not devised for a non-academic audience. Overall, I feel that Birns' *Contemporary Australian Literature* has carried out its duty with panache, giving readers a refreshed perspective on a field for which he has taken up the cudgels since the early 1980s.

NOTES

1. See the plea by Michael Heyward in "Classics going to waste," *The Age* (22 January 2012), URL: <<http://www.theage.com.au/it-pro/classics-going-to-waste-20120121-1qb9z.html>, accessed on 14/03/2016>. Following this state of affairs, Sydney University Press decided to put a series of classic titles back in print through affordable editions.
 2. See Amanda Dunn, "University slashes Australian studies," *The Sydney Morning Herald* (19 February 2012), URL: <<http://www.smh.com.au/national/tertiary-education/university-slashes-australian-studies-20120218-1tg5e.html>>, accessed on 14/03/2016. See also Kerry Goldsworthy for a synthesis of this debate in "What We Talk About When We Talk About Australian Literature," *Sydney Review of Books* (29 January 2013), URL: <<http://www.sydneyreviewofbooks.com/what-we-talk-about-when-we-talk-about-australian-literature/>>, accessed on 14/03/2016.
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AUTHORS

JEAN-FRANÇOIS VERNAY

Jean-François VERNAY's first monograph, *Water from the Moon: Illusion and Reality in the Works of Australian Novelist Christopher Koch* (Cambria Press), came out in 2007. The translations of his latest books will be released in 2016 as *A Brief Take on the Australian Novel* (Wakefield Press) and *The Seduction of Fiction: A Plea for Putting Emotions Back into Literary Interpretation* as part of the Palgrave Studies in Affect Theory and Literary Criticism Series.