

Some Thoughts on Australian Literature

by KATHARINE SUSANNAH PRICHARD

AT a social gathering in Perth, recently, Mr. Leslie Haylen, M.H.R., appealed for support for the Australasian Book Society.

In a stirring speech he pointed out how important this publishing organisation is to young Australian writers, particularly writers in tune with what is known as "the democratic tradition in Australian literature."

A week or so before this gay gathering at the home of Dorothy and Merv Lilley, there had been a series of lectures entitled "The Australian Image", under the auspices of the Commonwealth Literary Fund, at the University of Western Australia.

I was not able to attend, but asked several people what they thought of the lectures.

Bert Vickers was one of them. His "Mirage" has been translated into several languages, and he has written other novels based on experiences as a worker on out-back stations, among the aborigines, and about conditions in our cities and suburbs.

He said: "I was thoroughly disgusted with the facetious attitude towards Lawson and Furphy of some lecturers. And the adulation of Patrick White as the creator of a new and truly Australian image."

A woman who reads widely and intelligently exclaimed:

"I was simply furious at the way the work of first-rate Australian writers was brushed aside and disparaged.

Some of these university men know little of Australia beyond the grounds of the university. And, it would seem, have less understanding of what makes stories and poems live in our memory!"

Several students expressed indignation at attempts to overcast a realistic conception of Australia and the Australian people with the smoke-screen of a disgruntled imagination. They objected to a sniping at writers with so-called "Left tendencies" and complained that university lectures were often a cover for red-baiting.

What does this mean?

That the political prejudices of lecturers affect their appraisement of values in literature?

It would appear to be so. And that, although Lawson's poems and stories have won the love and appreciation, not only of the Australian people, but of thousands overseas, the academic attitude to his work has not changed very much

from the time he wrote, "To My Cultured Critics":

"I come with the strength of the living day,
And half the world behind me."

The academic attitude towards contemporary literature has always been more of a cringe to conformity with pressures of the moment than an indication of any wide culture.

It was hostile to Keats, Shelley, Browning, Flaubert, Hugo, Hardy, Zola, Gorki, to name but a few, whose genius challenged pedantic illusions.

"The Australian Image"

What this is, I don't know, and dislike the term. There can be no single image which reflects a country so vast and so differing in many aspects, as Australia. The people of cities and the country are as varied in their interests and character as the people of any other country. They change and develop with the changes time and environment force upon them.

Lawson and Furphy reflected a people animated by the spirit of pioneers in human affairs as well as in conquest of the land: a people respecting human rights and a bond of mateship among those struggling for achievement of those rights.

I can accept this interpretation as still true for a majority of the Australian people. What has been called "the democratic tradition in Australian literature" derives from these ideas. That does not mean our finest writers have been limited by an historical background. They have travelled far and wide, increasing our knowledge of how time and changes are affecting the men and women of Australia; but always with sympathy for, and understanding of, those basic principles which have steered the progress of the nation.

It is against this commitment of most Australian writers to a broad humanism that some academic book-worms are directing a cynical offensive, professing to find in the psychological perversities and fantasies of Patrick White a new and more valid image of Australia and the Australian people.

What could be more absurd?

White wrote "The Tree Of Man", he says: "Because the void I had to fill was so immense" . . .

Why is a man so pretentious? To ignore all that others have written about a country and people they belong to in spirit and by intimate association, in my opinion, indicates an

egotism, malign and ungenerous. It could not be expected to review any human situation except through the lens of this personal idiosyncrasy.

Although that is significant to writers who are familiar with the people and scenes they describe, what I resent most is the negative attitude of White to people: his pre-occupation with the ugliest phases of human behaviour. He seems to have an affinity only with morons and nit-wits.

Bitter personal frustration may be responsible for an astigmatism in his vision; but we cannot permit such a falsification as the suburban Sarsaparilla epitome to be considered valid for the whole Australian people.

We must urge young writers not to be influenced by the temporary fashion for this sort of caricaturing to represent a community. We must maintain the standard of Australian writers whose instinctive regard for reason and valour in the struggle for humane objectives is in accord with that of the sanest thinkers of our time.

Alan Marshall, John Morrison, Frank Hardy, Bert Vickers, Dymphna Cusack, Eleanor Dark and others, who have gained an international reputation, report more truly for our country and people than wanderers in the wasteland of their imagination.

Lost in the fog of their own delusions, writers like White believe they are uncommitted to any social purpose, while, as a matter of fact, they serve the causes of obfuscation and the defeat of human dignity in its demand for truth and justice.

Mysticism and abstraction in the novels of Patrick White and his play with words, please academic critics removed from the everyday life of a vigorous and pragmatic people. But these qualities are not apparent in short stories published lately, which are nauseating in their treatment of men, women and children as though they were merely unpleasant creatures.

It is of the utmost importance that young writers are not led astray from their study of Australian realities by a presentation only of unsavoury realities: lovely and stimulating realities must be recorded as well as those that are ugly and loathsome.

We Australian writers must not let ourselves be betrayed into the vague for obscurity and obscenity which the avant garde of literary critics, at present, regard as necessary ingredients of a work of the creative imagination.

These avant garde critics are not really a forward-looking guard of supreme values in literature. Rather are they retrograde in their outlook: obsessed by failure and frustration in the vagaries of moral and physical experience.

A gross and sordid estimate of the potentialities of men and women for deeds of high purpose arises from this philosophy of pes-

simism and antisocial sophistry. The individualism exalted is ego-centric and alienated from logical perception of causes and effects in the struggle to live.

Fossickers in the dark of the sub-conscious are blind to the tremendous spiritual adventures of mass liberation movements in our day and age

Realism, not fantasy, is what Australians, the majority of us, stack on. Those writers most familiar with the Australian people know that the mainspring of our devotion to them is due to that fact.

Hypocrisy, snobbery, cowardice and all the vices, we realise, exist; but over and above concessions to the need for earning a living, flames the will of working people who refuse to submit to outrages of their sense of decency and fair dealing.

We remember that it was Australian workers who protested against the shipment of scrap iron to Japan when the Chinese people were fighting for their independence.

Again, Australian workers opposed aid for Dutch repression of the Indonesian people in their resistance to a corrupt colonial regime. Many other instances of courageous action in defence of the victims of injustice, at home and abroad, could be cited.

We have every reason to be proud of a spirit in the Australian people, never made subservient by hardships or defeat. It keeps alive the tradition of a virile humanism in Australian literature.

This is far removed from "the Australian Image" of a confused, moronic, almost illiterate people, motivated only by the grossest instincts, which, these days, some of the dilettante intellectuals are seeking to foist upon us. To them we reply with O'Dowd's vision of a Socialist Australia as: "the El Dorado of old dreamers, the Sleeping Beauty of the world's desire."

"Yet she shall be as we, the Potter mould,
Altar or tomb, as we aspire, despair."

And there is Bartlett Adamson's "Toast of Honour" to:

"This great Australia that our fathers won
In proud defiance of a thousand fates!
This ocean-garden sacred to the sun!
This land of hope! This land where men
are mates!"

Drink to your native rages and your plains,
Men with the sunlight singing in your veins!"

Frank Willnot flung his challenge to "majestic nagbots" of the cultural cringe when he wrote his magnificent chant royal in "El Gai Saber".