

TRADITION AND TODAY

FFIFTY years ago Henry Lawson wrote: "The press of Australia and its unspeakable mediocrities have ever had a tendency to belittle their own writers." In Lawson's day, when Australian literature won its independence of English literature and emerged as genuinely native-grown, the great majority of academic and journalistic critics lost few opportunities of deriding and rejecting it.

Why this was so is not hard to find.

A distinctively Australian literature was born among the native-born and nationally-minded men and women of the "lower classes" to whom Joseph Furphy claimed a hereditary belonging; they rejected instinctively and impatiently the culture and outlook of their social and economic betters, the squatters, merchants and manufacturers who adopted as their own the fashionable literature of England.

The creators of the new literature—Lawson, Furphy, "Banjo" Paterson, William Lane, Mary Gilmore, Miles Franklin, Steele Rudd, Bernard O'Dowd—drew their images from the Australian common man—the convict, digger, selector, shear-er, and from the early struggles of the labor and radical movements—Eureka, the 8-hour day, the demand that the land be unlocked, the strikes of shearers and miners.

Their outlet was through the radical and socialist weeklies—the Bulletin, the Boomerang, the Worker; their champions were the early labor publicists; their audience was found largely in the ranks of the Australian Shearers' Union and the newly-formed socialist and labor organisations.

Thus were the values of Australian literature established as being democratic in temper, human in approach, national in spirit, plebeian in orientation, and above all faithful to the realities of Australian life. And this tradition has endured.

This natural acceptance of class division and social alignment by Australian writers is at last being combatted in a different manner. No longer is Australian literature ignored, or rejected out of hand. Instead, its importance in Australian life is conceded (though often grudgingly), and new interpretations of the tradition, new directions for contemporary writers, are being strongly urged.

So the (un-named) author of a recent Current Affairs Bulletin, "Standards in Australian Literature", deploras the fact that "Australian fiction practically ignores all except the lower income groups . . ." This is all the more unfortunate, we are told, as there is no real working-class left in Australia, and "Australians now for the most part form a homogeneous middle class."

The Current Affairs Bulletin survey offers a new perspective for our writers: a literature which is cut off from its traditional roots in Australia and among working Australians. And this perspective is already appearing in the creative and editorial activity of some Australian writers.

The recent Sydney Morning Herald £2,000 competition for a novel by an Australian writer was won by Mr. John McGhee, "a Sydney business executive," with a novel called "The Middle Way." The opening chapters read like a fictional dressing-up of the concept, recently expounded by the Prime Minister, of a classless Australia.

At the other end of the social scale is the group of Sydney novels which depict slum-life as romantic, poverty as picturesque.

These new directions in Australian literature have for the first time found a home in a literary journal, with the appearance of the new quarterly Quadrant, published by the American-financed Committee for Cultural Freedom and edited by James McAuley.

The folklore of big business secures an adequate (and doubtless highly priced) position in advertising in Quadrant: "Enterprise," "Efficiency," "Partnership for Progress," "Symbol of Enlightened Self-Interest," "It's up to Business Men to Tell the Story of Profits" (this last from Caltex Oil!) are the headlines devised by the copy-writers to impress Quadrant's readers with the benevolence of capital.

Mr. McAuley's opening statement of editorial aims is no mere manifesto of conservatism in literature: it is explicitly reactionary. For Mr. McAuley does not just seek to preserve society and literature as they are; he argues that forms of society and thought which have long passed out of existence should be restored. And in doing so he rejects those values which we have come almost to take for granted as the unifying thread, the spiritual core of Australian literature.

He speaks for an Australian "orientation," but condemns "the ugly nineteenth-century vice of cultural nationalism." He deploras that "the very notion of authority has been treated with the acids of modern criticism."

Both in volume and in public esteem, our literature has grown enormously in its 75 years of independent existence—and this despite the financial difficulties of Australian publishing, the narrowing commercial outlets for Australian stories and poems, the wall of silence which the majority of newspapers and magazines erect between Australian writers and readers, the attacks on writers which have from time to time disfigured Federal Parliament.

The works of the first generation of Australian poets and story-tellers increase in popularity; interest in Australian folklore is widespread; cooperative publishing ventures such as the Australasian Book Society continue to grow; Australian Book Fairs attract thousands; sales of books by contemporary writers expand; proposals for the teaching of Australian literature in schools and universities receive wide popular support.

This is the picture of a literature in growth—one which is predominantly democratic, realistic, national and popular. It is an encouraging picture—but that does not mean that the danger to Australian literary values can be ignored. For the attack on democratic and humanist concepts of literature is world-wide; it is well supported by powerful social and political forces both here and abroad, and has ample financial backing.

Our literary tradition is brief in time, rich in quality. It is a tradition which has not, and can not, stand still. It is not for our writers today to repeat the work done by their forerunners, but to create new work which is vital and contemporary, thoughtful and provoking, which has social relevance without being cruelly functional or utilitarian, which stands close to the lives of the characteristic Australians of today—the men and women of the industries, the cities, the farms—and which gives them an image of Australian life that they can recognise as true and important. These have been the real qualities of our literature, and they will continue to be, if Overland has anything to do with it—and we believe we have.