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‘Tinned Literature’? Literary Discussion in *The Brisbane Courier* (1930)

Leigh Dale

To date, histories of literary culture in Queensland have not paid particular attention to newspapers, despite the fact that metropolitan and regional publications carried considerable material that allows us insight into the ways in which books were circulated and evaluated. Reviews and essays sat alongside advertisements run by department stores, specialist retailers, large distributors and newsagents, in turn jostling for attention with interviews with authors, poems, reports of literary gatherings and substantial critical essays.¹ This article offers a ‘case study’ of literary materials in *The Brisbane Courier*, part of a project on the representation of literature (broadly conceived) in Australian newspapers from 1930.² The year 1930 was chosen because the interwar years are so frequently characterised, in discussion of the critical study of Australian literature in particular, as a time of neglect, and the Depression as a catalyst for the gradual narrowing of literary horizons. Our larger aim is to understand this historical period better, as well as to calibrate the discussion of Australian literature against the discussion of literature generally. By focusing on a single year for data collection, we have been able to assemble a rich and detailed picture of ‘talk about books’. This, in turn, has enabled us to analyse the significant differences between, for example, the ways in which books are discussed and represented as commercial and aesthetic objects in regional and metropolitan newspapers (see Dale and Thomson 2010).

Veronica Kelly (2005) shows the complexity and volatility of *The Bulletin’s* identification of and with various currents of thought and value through the last decades of the nineteenth century. Negotiating the popular and the serious, the provincial and the metropolitan, the radical and the conservative, the newspaper played simultaneously to a range of audiences while always being attentive to the commercial. In a similar fashion, the reviewers, essayists and poets whose work appeared in *The Brisbane Courier* in 1930 sought to establish and maintain a range of readerly constituencies, while promoting literature in myriad forms. While drawing attention to individuals and themes in the paper, this article notes particularly the column ‘Books of the Week’, the main site of discussion of literature in *The Brisbane Courier*.

‘Books of the week’ occupied two columns on the left-hand side of page 22 (unless otherwise indicated) every Saturday. It specialised in diversity, aiming to please readers of a wide variety of books. *The Brisbane Courier’s* size was in the

order of 22 to 26 pages of eight columns, although individual issues have as few as 16 pages (around New Year) or as many as 30, with the number varying from day to day. The newspaper was published six times per week (resting on Sunday) throughout 1930. In 1933, *The Brisbane Courier* merged with the *Daily Mail* to form the *Courier-Mail*, owned by Keith and then Rupert Murdoch, and at that time was claimed by its editor to be printing 62,000 copies a day (Goot 1979: 5).³ In terms of the readership addressed by the paper, at one level this is ‘Australian’, in that news from overseas and items of national significance were reported. More often, though, the scope and concerns were determinedly local – although this ‘local’ in turn varies in range, being defined variously as the state, the region of southeast Queensland, or the city of Brisbane. By contrast, advertising was placed mainly by Brisbane retailers.⁴

Since major regional centres like Toowoomba, Rockhampton and Townsville had their own daily newspapers, and since the combination of technology and geography limited same-day distribution to the Brisbane region, we might reasonably assume that whereas the address of advertisers reflects the distribution of actual readers (Brisbane and surrounds), the implied readership of most news items (‘Queenslanders’) is a reflection of the newspaper’s ambition to be a leading voice in state affairs. Topics of sustained interest show the shifting of range: economic and political crises in Queensland; the success of the Australian cricket team in England; the arrival in Queensland of aviator Amy Johnston; ongoing violence in north Queensland against Italians. Another item of sustained interest is the pursuit of former state premier E.G. Theodore for corruption. In terms of political position, it is worth noting that the paper is sometimes critical of the outcry against immigration, carrying stories, cartoons or commentary implicitly or explicitly critical of agitation and irrational prejudice. In a similar vein, the paper signals its stance in applauding the appointment of John Masefield as Poet Laureate: ‘It is a sign of the time that a poet of the underdog, the poet who saw beauty by the quayside amid the litter of ships, should be chosen as the King’s minstrel.’ (‘New Poet Laureate’ 1930).

The paper’s stance on political issues can be understood as a reaction against what Raymond Evans (2007) has described as a decade of industrial turmoil and politically motivated violence; clearly the newspaper saw its role as providing a ‘voice of reason’ in these circumstances. Economic conditions in Queensland in 1930 were, of course, parlous, as had been the case for much of the decade, matching the political unrest (2007: 165). But in some sense the literary discussion seems deliberately to distance itself from these issues, for only rarely are books about politics, economics or related issues discussed in the newspaper. One exception is the mention of economic historian Edward Shann’s *Bond or free*, which is given high praise (3 May 1930: 20). One of the starker indicators of the Depression, at least in terms of discussion about literary culture, is a series of articles covering the auction of books and furniture from Brisbane’s Johnsonian Club, which had been a venue for literary discussion since 1878 and which seems to have played a significant role in the cultural life of the city. The dispersal of its possessions is reported as a marker of ‘troubled times’, in an article noting that Brunton Stephens had composed and read an ode on the occasion of the club’s move to permanent premises. The report of the auction, under the headline ‘First “Couriers”’, begins by announcing that the highest price paid for a book was the £31 for a bound volume

of the first year's issue of *The Moreton Bay Courier*. The auctioneer notes that the paper was 'far below the standard of the present day', the main value lying in the comparison, which shows 'how the "Courier" had grown and had progressed with the State'.⁵ Here the symbiotic relationship that was envisaged between state and newspaper is nicely demonstrated, with each enriching and validating the other as the biological metaphor merges the cultural and the commercial.

The discussion of literary topics takes a variety of narrative forms. The death of Robert Bridges, the appointment of Masefield and an address in Brisbane by Governor Sir John Goodwin on *Macbeth* are all presented as news items. The paper carries contributions on literary activities in Brisbane, including a letter from J.J. Stable of the University of Queensland on playwrights, plays and competitions, which pays particular attention to encouraging the former.⁶ The paper published occasional essays, debates, discussions and reviews, including 'My Memories of Joseph Conrad' by Jessie Conrad, a series that ran over the summer holidays from 1929 into 1930, essays on 'The Art of the Novel' by Penfold Kyd, reviews of books clearly thought to be of particular note, usually Australian – these outside of 'Books of the Week' – as well as essays from occasional contributors such as Nettie Palmer, Bessie Palmer and D.L. Waraker.⁷ Few Saturday editions of the newspaper did not have some reference to Australian books, and Australian content was perhaps strongest on 26 July when, apart from two poems about the beauty of the landscape, there were reviews of Roy Bridges' *Negrohead*, Agnes Kearnan's poetry, Arthur Upfield's detective series *Bony* and Norman Lindsay's *Redheap*, the latter of note because it had recently been republished and then banned.⁸

'Books of the week' is a collection of reviews of gradually decreasing length. The column usually begins with a substantial review of 300–400 words, followed by two or three shorter reviews of 'serious' works (around 150 words), then shorter paragraphs – two or three sentences – devoted to a work of genre fiction. The lead review is almost always of a work of non-fiction, which is often British, although Australian works occupy the lead position around 40 per cent of the time. This suggests a disproportionate interest in local material, a pattern more consistent with a regional than a metropolitan newspaper in this period (Dale and Thomson 2010). Each new review is separated from the previous with a sub-heading, usually the author's name but occasionally the topic or genre of the book. In the slightly longer reviews that follow the lead discussion, frequently mentioned topics are novels about the war or soldiers' memoirs, poetry, and works of non-fiction, particularly those concerned with history, politics and the economy. Reviews of war books often suggest ambivalence or weariness, but *Everyman at war* is enthusiastically received as a volume 'that does honour to the British soldier, and such a book [i]s needed as a set-off against the mass of pacifist slush that has been pouring from the presses' (24 May 1930). 'Books of the week' rarely dithers in offering judgement, yet at the same time its structure and concerns strongly suggest that there is a concern to appeal to as many readers as possible, mainly by mentioning a wide variety of new books.

In terms of audience and gender, it is significant to historians of reading that 'Books of the week' should twice suggest (albeit in passing) that romances would be read by male as well as female readers. With regard to *Eve in Egypt* by Jane Starr, it is noted that '[t]he book is full of the little things that interest the every-day man and woman' (8 February 1930), while Michael Kidd's *The dawn wind*, published

by Mills and Boon, is described as ‘one of those wholesome love stories which delight the usual man and woman’ (31 May 1930). Whether these remarks on the appeal of romance to male readers are attempts to cultivate a larger readership or whether they record the known habits of book buyers and borrowers is difficult to say, but it is clear that the space devoted to single works of political or historical study reflects a hierarchy which places works of non-fiction at the top, just as the inclusion of larger *numbers* of works of genre fiction and the positioning of that discussion in the last quarter of the column are a recognition of popularity. Put another way, the column quite literally juxtaposes ‘quality’ with ‘quantity’ every week, through its spatial arrangement of reviews.

The brief notices of popular fiction that end the column usually consist of summaries of gloriously implausible plots (usually, but not always, delivered straight-faced), followed either by a good-natured recommendation or a crisp comment on a lapse in plausibility or decorum. At times, there is both: ‘The book makes too great a strain upon the reader’s credulity, but is intensely sensational.’⁹ That plausibility has a moral element is explicit, and the reviewer’s customary briskness is nicely demonstrated in reviewing Ethel M. Dell’s *The altar of honour*: ‘Charmaine is really very poor stuff, yet her husband and her son apparently are content to sacrifice everything to condone her weakness. Her charm Miss Dell insists on, but she completely fails to convey it to the reader.’ (11 January 1930: 18). Neither praise nor blame is distributed unequally on the basis of gender: the following week, ‘Mr Herbert P. Lee’ is chided for being ‘a great deal too sentimental’ at the same time that Gertrude Vaughan is said to have ‘let the story run away from her’ (18 January 1930: 20).

A genuine sympathy for women occasionally surfaces in the briefer reviews. Perhaps the most explicit of these comes in the defence of Adah Menken, ‘a circus queen, and a passionate lover, who attracted the attentions of Swinburne, and subsequently went to Paris and fell into the sheltering arms of the elder Dumas’. Fulton Oursler’s *The world’s delight* is firmly dismissed with the declaration that ‘the designing, adventurous woman he presents would hardly have drawn from Swinburne the remark that she was “the world’s delight”’ (20 September 1930: 20). And there are several reviews of books about notable women, the most explicitly enthusiastic of which is of Elsie M. Lang’s *British women in the twentieth century*, a book that

leads the which reader through many spheres in which women simply and naturally hold their own, and shows how every yard of the way had to be fought and won. [Lang] discusses the difficulties that beset women in getting a higher education, and the fight to win the franchise, to secure recognition in the medical and legal professions, and the struggle that was needed to destroy the prejudices of the nineteenth century. The book is not well written, but it is a very fine record of the heroic struggle by the pioneers of the feminist movement for the emancipation of women. (1 March 1930)

If they were sometimes close to feminist, the reviews affirmed generally pro-imperialist and decidedly racist sentiments. The most unlikely of the plot summaries that provide the staple of the last third of the column offers this on Peter B. Kyne’s *Golden Dawn*:

Penelope, hated by a brutal foster mother, gets terribly disfigured, and told that she has negro blood in her veins. In one personality she is a disfigured society girl; in the other she has criminal tendencies, becomes an expert member of the gang, and is sentenced to a term of imprisonment . . . By brilliant operation her face is restored and her criminal personality is exorcised. The parentage is traced; she has a fortune awaiting her, and one leaves her with the knowledge that all the clouds have rolled away . . . (18 October 1930)

The same concern with racial and cultural purity is evident in the discussion of *Relentless*:

Briefly, the story concerns the young son of an explorer – a primitive man irked to madness by civilisation – and a suburban type of woman with narrow ‘street-bred’ ideals. Oscar, the son, is a misfit, and not until he throws off the shackles of London and retreats to a half-civilised primitive race does he develop. But the tragedy lies in the children of Oscar, brought up with a backward race, with minds leaping ahead of their companions. Miss Johnston writes a story of stark unhappiness, but unlike most novels of realism, ‘Relentless’ never revolts one. It is both restrained and absorbing. (21 June 1930: 24)

The concern to buttress racial purity is confirmed by various positive reviews of memoirs and histories of colonialism – books that are particularly well represented among those reviewed. The prevailing attitude is well indicated in the opening remark of a discussion of Justine Kenyon’s *The Aboriginal word book*: ‘The language of the Australian blacks has gone and the material that is available for a study of the various dialects is quite unsatisfactory, even if the subject were really worth the time.’ (2 August 1930) The review concludes: ‘Doubtless, however, the little book will have its use if merely that of providing names for houses’ – a grimly ironic confirmation of the perceived ‘replacement’ of one kind of dwelling with another.

The hostility to Aborigines was explicit again when ‘Books of the week’ described some characters in Vance Palmer’s *Men are human* as ‘weak’, and tersely objected to Palmer’s attempt to tell stories with Aboriginal characters: ‘when Boyd, the son, gets hopelessly entangled with a half-caste girl, there was probably no better way out of the trouble than his death under the hoofs of a mob of ringing cattle’ (12 July 1930). A review of Arthur Groom’s *Merry Christmas*, which had been serialised in the *Bulletin* the previous year, did applaud an Aboriginal character as a ‘wonderfully loyal blackfellow, whose knowledge of bush-craft provides the author with a heroic and thrilling chapter’ (11 October 1930: 18) but the question is whether this praise of what might be thought of as a safely pre-historic talent is congruent with the contempt for Indigenous languages shown in the comments on *The Aboriginal word book*. In a very rare example of quotation that confirms the column’s promotion of imperialist cultural values, Arthur Upfield’s *The beach of atonement* is praised for concluding with the sentence that ‘Never will the Empire go down while it can produce its Hester Longs’ (26 July 1930).

Notwithstanding some of the comments quoted above, ‘Books of the week’ rarely uses lemon juice to write its reviews, so its appraisal of H.M. Green’s *Outline of Australian literature* seems unusually scathing. Green was pilloried for a book of criticism that seemed to *The Brisbane Courier* to have ‘been too hurriedly prepared’

– later, ‘hurriedly flung together’ – ‘to allow for it being accepted as the authority that we hoped it would be’ (19 April 1930: 20).¹⁰ The ‘principal protest’, though, is not against this apparent carelessness, but that local poet Brunton Stephens had been ‘dismiss[ed]’ ‘almost contemptuously as “rather a cultured and humorous man of letters with a streak of poetry running through him than a poet”’; *The Brisbane Courier*’s reviewer terms this judgement ‘simply nonsense’.¹¹ The review gives some praise, but accuses Green of peddling second-hand opinions of Sydney’s younger literary set (to which Green replied indignantly in a letter that he knew no such set!). Soon after the Green debate, *The Brisbane Courier* again takes academic critics to task in a long and hostile review of C. Hartley Grattan’s *Australian literature* (‘As others see us’),¹² challenging the judgements made therein: ‘Yet some of us have found Maurice Guest, the neurotic musician at Leipsic [sic], both exotic and wearisome, without any appeal whatever for Australians, and far prefer the genuinely native work of Vance Palmer.’ Perhaps the real sting for *The Brisbane Courier* lies in Grattan’s assessment of the daily newspapers, quoted in the review, as ‘either so uncritical as to be utterly colourless, or so stupid as to denounce with uncanny accuracy all that is worthwhile in prose and verse’.

If this response hints at there being sensitivity about the view of a ‘foreign’ critic as well as those ‘down south’, this is confirmed by the tone of the review of Henry Kellow’s *Queensland poets*. Kellow is praised for having ‘brought to his . . . task the balanced judgment, the analytic gift, and the mental resilience of a trained critic of poetry’: ‘No spurious nationalism deflects his urbane judgment.’ (4 October 1930: 12). There is evidence in the newspaper that sensitivities were easily roused. A set of stories with the intriguing title ‘Eisteddfod Incident’ notes that trouble brewed after interlopers from Melbourne took first place in the ‘Grand Choral Contest’ held in Brisbane, defeating Ipswich’s renowned Cambrian choir. After the results were declared, ‘some of the local partisans relieved their pent feelings with a display against the Melbourne choir that was unfair and thoroughly unsportsmanlike’. The incident was of sufficient import to prompt two letter writers to defend the response plaintively the following day under the same headline, while a supporter of the writer of the disapproving account thundered against the ‘disgraceful incidents’, the ‘hoodlum actions of a number of partisans’ in Saturday’s edition (26 April 1930: 24).

Debating the Value of Literature

While the value of the book as a commodity lies in its newness, its value as *literature* lies in age, in the durability of collective judgement. For the reviewer, authority is always undercut by time – speed, as well as contemporaneity. This demand for speed meshes with the commercial demand for turnover, so that the reviewing pages come to be no place for the statement of enduring literary judgement. Indeed, there seems to have been consensus that a century was about the right time for judgement to become ‘safe’: the writer of ‘Dorothy Wordsworth’ opens by suggesting that ‘it has taken a hundred years for [her] to come into her own’, while the author of ‘Burns in Australia’ notes that the poet had thought he would be more respected ‘a hundred years hence’ than he was in his own time. The use of the century as a signature of quality is affirmed, incidentally, by the advertisers of Cashmere Bouquet soap, while the author of ‘Drama and Music’ comments simply and sagely that ‘only time

will tell'. Very rarely does 'Books of the week' assign classic status to a work of non-fiction, and the column seems careful to occupy a middle ground on aesthetic issues. Put simply, the reviewers are working in a different temporality from that which sets the parameters for the essayists.

Taken collectively, the reviews seem to follow the parameters for judgement established in Penfold Kyd's essays on 'The art of the novel', a set of five essays published in the early months of 1930. In Kyd's frankly stated view, the novel appeals 'to those who had received but a very limited mental training'; superficiality marks the reader, the form and the relationship between the two. The five elements of a novel are plot, characterisation, setting, style and 'motive' [for telling the story], and in the perfect novel all five elements would be presented 'with equal high interest and in perfect harmony' (Kyd 1930b). Interestingly, Kyd cites changes to technology – the rising popularity of cinema and wireless, the new syllabus in Queensland schools which included recitation and speaking, and the efflorescence of speech and drama clubs and competitions – as restoring the cultural prominence of the voice, which the novel had – temporarily, as it now seemed – usurped (Kyd 1930a). But the essays also open up the problem of whether and how a novel should offer an 'authentic' representation of the world whilst remaining 'fiction'. Kyd declares that, 'The raw material of the novelist is life ... It is essential that the characters portrayed in a novel should be within the range of human possibility ... A novel, if it has any literary value, must possess the quality of "authenticity": that is it must be, or must appear to be, true to life.' (1930b). Yet the task is also to educate: 'with its cloak of reality, in addition to the entertainment, the mental relaxation it affords us, [the novel] conveys to us a certain amount of information concerning a subject which of which we are all, consciously or unconsciously, eager at all times to obtain a better grip' (1930b).

If Kyd's essays provide a set of rules for judgement, those by the women writers that address local cultural concerns are very different. The critic whose signed work appears most regularly in *The Brisbane Courier* during 1930 is Nettie Palmer, whose essays seem designed to evoke curiosity in a range of readers by using titles like 'The Gully', 'Conversation', 'Austral English', 'Cheerfulness in Literature', 'Max' [Beerbohm], 'Ireland', 'Stet', 'Overworked names' and 'The gnat's jokes'. There is a sense here of Palmer copying her university teacher Walter Murdoch: begin with a meditation on a simple object, then embroider in order to raise a larger cultural, moral or political question. Murdoch himself still had currency: his collection, *Speaking personally*, is reviewed on 15 November (1930: 18). But Palmer's essays are concerned explicitly with the fortunes of Australian literature, conceived in terms of the value of culture. Books are needed to populate a 'virgin land' (Palmer 1930b). In her first contribution for 1930, 'Will Dyson: Creative Militant' (1930c), Palmer mounts a strongly worded case for the need to support Australian publishers. Her argument is that this is *not* a commercial issue but a cultural one, in a period when something like two-thirds of first edition Australian books were produced by British publishers: 'Alone among "adult" nations, we have not serious belief in the importance of giving full expression to our developing mental life ... We are content to be consumers, returning nothing to the world from which we import so freely' (Palmer 1930c; see also Bode 2012). Reading and purchasing are blurred here. While Palmer is surely arguing for the *purchase* of Australian books, this kind of consumption is couched in terms of the need

for *cultural* maturity. Palmer approvingly quotes Dyson’s lecture on ‘The Arts in Australia’:

An active publishing trade is the attribute of all adult nations. Until we have one, we must remain colonial, provincial, and outside . . . The publishing houses of Germany, by giving out such books as ‘All Quiet on the Western Front,’ and ‘The Case of Sergeant Grischa.’ [sic] are putting Germany back on to the map of human kinship . . . I[t] is the American publishing houses that, by pouring out the works of Mencken, [Dreiser], Lewis, Sinclair, and O’Neill, are tempering the world’s harsh and envious verdict on America.

Australia, says Palmer, must get into ‘the habit of publishing books here’, and this can only come about by changing copyright law. Until then, Australian readers will be doomed to the consumption of what she calls ‘tinned literature from overseas’: not fresh and local, but stale and imported, carrying the seal of approval of overseas critics but without the zest of local relevance. Her metaphor of ‘tinned literature’ is oddly anti-modern: it is the local, the organic, the fresh, that is valued, but this works against that temporality which the reviewers use as the signature of quality: in literature as in cricket, a hundred is a kind of guarantee. Palmer’s obvious literary nationalism is framed in terms of the content of literary works and the work they do in making places known to the people who inhabit them. As examples, she cites the success in 1929 of *Coonardoo* by Katharine Susannah Prichard, *A house is built* by M. Barnard Eldershaw and *Ultima thule* by Henry Handel Richardson. But Palmer was not indiscriminate in her praise of Australian work. ‘Books of the Week’ revels in a new Angus and Robertson edition of Clarke’s *His Natural Life* that makes the serial version available for the first time in a single volume: a ‘beautifully printed book of 657 pages’, ‘with the whole of the original illustrations’ in an edition costing the then extraordinary sum of 30 shillings (12 April 1930: 24).¹³ This might seem to exemplify the kind of book of which Palmer would approve, but in fact she is much less than enthusiastic, ruefully warning readers that ‘Clarke just went on and on, losing count of his words, but hoping they would tot up pretty high.’ (Palmer 1930a)

Palmer’s approach was very different to those of the academics whose views are reported in the newspaper. J.J. Stable, holder of the Chair of Modern Languages and then the Chair of English at the University of Queensland, was active in theatrical and other cultural organisations, chairing the first meeting for the year of the English and Modern Language Association (‘English Association’). At that gathering, a paper on ‘The grand style and the sublime’ was delivered by his colleague F.W. Robinson, the details of which were reported separately (‘Literary Comments’ 1930). Robinson proposes a remedy for what he perceives as an ailing local literature: a historical survey of Australian literature and increased capacities for libraries. Whereas for Palmer the cure is purchase and reading of Australian books by the population at large, Robinson calls for them to be described and catalogued so that we might know beforehand whether the book is valuable. Naming Nettie Palmer, H.M. Green and academics like A.T. Strong (of Melbourne and Adelaide) as exemplars, Robinson stresses ‘the necessity of adequate and competent criticism, also the need that exists for research libraries, reading libraries, and bibliographies’ (‘Our literature’ 1930) to develop Australian literature.¹⁴ In his view, ‘a group of thoroughly trained men’ (‘Our literature’ 1930: 14) was needed to

evaluate the literature so far produced in Australia. Interestingly, the newspaper did not respond by noting its own activities, but by endorsing Robinson's call for the production of an evaluative bibliography of Australian literature, and applauding the founding of the John Oxley Library ('Literary research' 1930).

A view closer to Palmer's – one that perceived the national literature as a public good – was in evidence just two days earlier when *The Brisbane Courier* printed a letter from James Booth, president of the Australian Literature Society. Booth, writing from Melbourne, was seeking support for the Society's campaign to purchase a house that had belonged to Adam Lindsay Gordon (Booth 1930: 8). *The Brisbane Courier* responded much more positively to Robinson's paper, which had been delivered at the History section of the biennial Science Congress that had concluded in Brisbane the previous day, than it did to the letter from James Booth:

A good bibliography would not overdo the applause where restraint was needed, but it would assign to each writer and each work something like its due place, and the criticism would undoubtedly help future Australian writers. Research libraries are necessary to any city aiming at culture . . . The Fryar [sic] Memorial Library at the University of Queensland is hampered for lack of funds and the difficulty of getting an adequate collection of Australian books. ('Literary Research' 1930)

Against this background, it is noticeable that literary contributions to *The Brisbane Courier* show a strongly Romantic or even fantastical strain, which is particularly evident in the poems that were regularly printed below 'Books of the week'. For example, at the same time as being skewered for his criticism, H.M. Green is applauded for his *Book of beauty* as part of a discussion promoting Keats' view that 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty – that is all / Ye need to know on earth and all ye need to know' (22 February 1930: 14). A regular contributor of poetry, Lola Gornall, exemplifies this mode in a poignant rebuttal of modern cynicism, which offers a critique of the 'new' worldliness of children in the poem 'Fairy Faith':

'Tell me a fairy story,' one child said.
The other shook her modern, shingled head:
'Fairies!' she scoffed: 'Such folly leaves me cold –
'Have you forgotten we are seven years old?'
And, as she spoke, her laughter rang about
The city's street above the traffic's shout.
Wounding me strangely as I stood apart,
Still loving fairies with my grown-up heart. (26 April 1930: 18)

For Gornall, new ideas of childhood, the urban and even of fashion seem to promote an aesthetic that is decidedly anti-literary. But this mood was perhaps also a deliberate attempt to offset another prevalent concern: World War I and its aftermath. This concern with the war was encapsulated in the brief appearance in *The Brisbane Courier* of poems by and stories about Bernard Archer, a former soldier from Launceston. Archer's life story was told in 'A Soldier Poet at Ardoyne', which gave notice of the submission of his book, *Singing bird and battlefield*, to a London publisher. For a short period, *The Brisbane Courier* carried poems by Archer, usually on the theme of nature's beauty, and the following lines poignantly

capture his dilemma: ‘Now that the body has grown weak, / And seldom ventures past a door; / Tis through the mind that I would seek / Those sights and sounds I knew of yore.’ (Archer 1930).¹⁵ About six weeks later, after Archer’s death, a poem by Llywelyn Lucas, a regular contributor of poems, appeared. ‘For Bernard Archer’ offered consolation: ‘The poetry of earth is ever new / While that still music trembles into birth / So, do not murmur, living was too brief, / Who now art one with lyric and with leaf.’

Archer’s presence in the literary pages is fragile and fleeting. In contrast, ‘Books of the Week’ is solid and extensive, but anonymous. The most obvious contender for authorship is (Thomas) Firmin McKinnon, who signed the ‘Books of the Week’ that was published in *The Courier-Mail* from 1933.¹⁶ If the column were the work of a single author, then it is testament to prodigious feats of reading, but there is another possibility. *The Brisbane Courier* had another member of the literary staff, Winifred Moore, who like McKinnon occupied several roles – in her case, editor of the women’s pages and social columnist. For a number of years, Moore wrote a column each December specifically devoted to children’s Christmas gift book suggestions, and there are some tantalising hints of her presence in ‘Books of the Week’. For example, on 29 November, ‘Books of the week’ gives an enthusiastic welcome to Ida Rentoul Outhwaite’s *Bunny and Brownie*, as ‘a fairy book’ that would be an ideal Christmas gift (1930: 18); Moore, writing her weekly column ‘Passing show’ in the women’s pages (as ‘Verity’) five days later recommends the same book in very similar terms.

More generally, the presence of at least two writers is implied by differences of tone: the reviews of the genre fiction have a little more *brio*, those of the works of non-fiction a little more loftiness, when set side by side. And while the reviews of genre fiction tend to be heavily focused on plot summary, the reviews of non-fiction rarely give much indication of the content beyond the title. The focus instead is on setting the new book in its political or intellectual context – in particular, noting the significance of the issue under discussion, and what else has been written on the topic. On that basis, the reviewer tends to offer an evaluation, along the lines of ‘the book will be useful to readers who . . .’ Another point of difference might lie in religion. Some of the reviews praise Anglican tracts in terms that imply adherence to that creed, but others take a less sectarian line. For example, a review of John Bagnell Bury’s *History of the papacy of the nineteenth century, 1864–1878* several times questions the impartiality of the author who, as a non-Catholic, had no opportunity to analyse the Vatican documents (5 July 1930: 22). By way of contrast, Rafael Sabatini’s *The minion* was praised for its ‘merciless’ picture of James I in his ‘shifting meanness, his extravagance and slobbering slyness, rather made worse than ennobled by his scholarship’ (8 November 1930: 18). It seems possible that ‘Books of the Week’ was a collaborative effort, with McKinnon writing the lead review and some of the slightly longer notices that followed, while Moore filled the rest of the two columns with discussion of the fiction that was so despised by *The Brisbane Courier*’s essayist Penfold Kyd (who nevertheless seemed rather knowledgeable about it).

The further twist in this puzzle is who was Penfold Kyd? ‘Kyd’ published two series of essays in *The Brisbane Courier* – those on ‘The art of the novel’ already mentioned, and nine on ‘English drama of today’ (from 30 July to 1 October in 1927), bearing out the sense evident in the fiction series that the yardstick

for literature is provided by classical drama. While I was writing and revising this article for publication, the National Library of Australia newspaper database showed no other work by Kyd, nor do searches of other sources reveal any essays or books by 'him'.¹⁷ Was this McKinnon in another guise, sharing his little-used first name with an early modern author whose name signifies puzzles about authorship, Thomas Kyd? Certainly 'Kyd' seems not to have published in other Australian newspapers, giving weight to the speculation that the author might have been a member of *The Brisbane Courier* staff, or at the least a local writer – something implied also by evident familiarity with the Queensland school curriculum. As one of the anonymous reviewers of this essay suggested, J.J. Stable is certainly another possibility, not least because of his interest in both school education and drama.

The advocates of 'Literature' who published in *The Brisbane Courier* clearly have very different views on what constitutes good writing, what constitutes valuable criticism, and what are reliable markers of the health of literary culture. Writing was an industry, a creative calling, a social activity and a cultural responsibility. Literature could offer several kinds of profession – writer, reviewer, university teacher – and the members of these professions often overlapped socially and in print. There is an overlap between competing notions of value within one space, perhaps even within the work of one author and certainly between authors whom readers were meant to read as a single voice. In this context, Nettie Palmer's contributions (promoting the work of Australian writers) offer a distinctive contribution, as do those of F.W. Robinson (arguing for the value of scholarship) and J.J. Stable (arguing for the value of local drama). While the layout and choice of books for review imply a prioritising of Australian writers, the newspaper was disinclined to do anyone but Queensland writers favours when it came to evaluation. But when it came to selecting books for review, any move to promote intellectual seriousness or aesthetic value was always balanced by attention to fiction that would sell.

Endnotes

- 1 'In 1933 there were about 30 papers sold for every hundred people aged 15 or more.' (Goot 1979: 8). Goot notes that newspaper sales climbed along with the spread of radio, and that the Australian states with the greatest growth in radio licences (Queensland, Tasmania and Western Australia) also had the greatest growth in newspaper sales (1979: 24).
- 2 The data on 'newspapers in 1930' have been compiled by Robert Thomson and David Singh, as a sub-project within 'Resourceful Reading', funded by the Australian Research Council DP 0770744.
- 3 The *ADB* is contradictory on the ownership of the newspaper in 1930. Griffin, writing on 'John Wren', says that 'Wren bought the *Brisbane Daily Mail* with Benjamin Nathan in 1915 and merged it with Sir Keith Murdoch's *Courier* in 1933'; the entry on Murdoch states that in 'the late 1920s Murdoch had personally bought a share in John Wren's *Brisbane Daily Mail*; in 1933 they bought the *Courier*, amalgamated it as the *Courier-Mail* and formed Queensland Newspapers Ltd' (Serle n.d.).
- 4 Beavan emphasises the importance of geography in determining scope and address in stories and advertising.
- 5 This might have reflected the fact that the newspaper had republished the contents of its first issue in 1926.
- 6 The paper applauded Stable for fostering local playwrights through his work with the Brisbane Repertory Theatre group ('Local drama' 1930). Stable's letter informed readers

that the society aimed to produce at least one local play each year, and was shortly to present three performances of Vance Palmer's *Christine* at the Cremorne theatre. Coverage was also given to Llywelyn Lucas's *The Sun-god's secret*.

- 7 Bessie Palmer was Nettie's sister-in-law; D.L. Waraker was later film critic for *The Telegraph*. I am indebted, for this information and much else that informs this essay, to Robert Thomson.
- 8 See "'Redheap'" (1930), 'Book censorship' (1930) and 'The literary censorship' (1930). Cartoonists, letter writers and versifiers lampooned the capacities of those who had made this decision.
- 9 Reviewing Sax Rohmer's *The day the world ended*, on 15 November 1930: 18.
- 10 On 25 October 1930 – around six months later – *The Brisbane Courier* reminded readers of Green's error in thinking William Blocksidge a pen-name for William Baylebridge (in fact, it was the other way around), while reviewing *Australia* by W.K. Hancock, who had made the same mistake (1930: 14).
- 11 The paper had another dig several months later in the review of Kellow's *Queensland poets*. In noting the chapter on George Essex Evans, it approved 'a sage aside in view of a recent controversy: "When an individual critic feels that he knows what's what in poetry it only means that he has evolved some standard of his own."' (4 October 1930: 12). The same review praises J.J. Stable for saving the poets of Queensland from obscurity with his research.
- 12 The tone and vocabulary accord with those of 'Books of the week'. For example, *Maurice Guest* is described as the product of 'the much-boomed authoress', and the distinctive 'over-boomed' is used six weeks earlier (29 March 1930: 20) in describing German books about the war.
- 13 Even a book on forest management is praised for being 'printed on art paper, well illustrated, and . . . handsomely bound' (11 October 1930: 18).
- 14 The linking of libraries to scholarly capacities was reiterated in a review of a *Catalogue of the scientific and technical periodicals in the libraries of Australia* ('Books of the week', 17 May 1930), which noted poor levels of holdings in Queensland: approximately two and half thousand of 35,282 journals.
- 15 A death notice on 12 July 1930 for 'Mr E.C. Barrett' notes that he was a close friend of Archer's. The two young men were both from Tasmania, both wounded in the war and both residents of the Anzac Repatriation Hostel.
- 16 I am indebted to Robert Thomson for this information. See MacAulay (n.d.).
- 17 No one of that name has published a book recorded in the British Library, Library of Congress, WorldCat or Library Australia catalogues. Nor have I been able to find the name in dictionaries of biography (Britain's *DNB*, the *ADB*, the *Biographical register* or Riley's *Biographical dictionary of American newspaper columnists*), databases recording authors of essays of criticism (MLA or AustLit), full-text newspaper sources such as Trove (NLA) or Factiva, or Australian electoral rolls for the first half of the twentieth century.

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