A member of the editorial board of ALR, a teaching fellow in English at the University of Sydney, examines the nature of the short story and its development in Australia in the course of reviewing recent books.

THE RECENT PUBLICATION of this two-volume anthology of Australian short stories provides a welcome opportunity to consider the development of the Australian short story and the problems which it now faces. Certainly it now has a different status to what it had in earlier years. For instance, Nettie Palmer could say in 1924: "Most of the best work that Australia has done in prose so far has been shown in the short story." Probably no one would say this now, less than half a century later. And yet, is this because a large number of great novels have been written in the intervening period, or because the short story is now looked upon in a different light?

Certainly when we think of what might be called the "golden age" of the Australian short story, the 1890's and the first years of this century, it seems clear that there has been some sort of decline in the medium, even if only in terms of the number of stories being published. To a large extent, of course, the situation is tied up with the decline of the Bulletin as a literary force. During the 1890's decade the Bulletin published 1,400 stories, an amazing figure and one which no present-day Australian journal could even approach. No doubt a lot of these stories were hardly worth publishing, but the fact remains that the Bulletin was a vehicle in which young writers could see their work in print, and were paid for it.

The difficulties writers now experience in even getting their stories printed are too well-known to need iteration here. Apart from the literary quarterlies such as Meanjin, Overland and Southerly (none of which has a very large circulation anyway) there is almost no outlet for short story writers. And this situation is especially true for young writers, trying to establish their reputations—the very sort of writers that the Bulletin bent over
backwards to attract. When we realize too that the stories of many of the best Bulletin writers (e.g., Price Warung) are now virtually unobtainable, it seems clear that the short story no longer occupies the same place in literary esteem that it so obviously did for Nettie Palmer.

   Short Stories of Australia: The Moderns, edited by Beatrice Davis, Angus and Robertson, $4.00.

This is not just an Australian phenomenon either. A recent symposium in The London Magazine (September 1966) on the decline, if not the fall, of the short story painted a depressing picture. V. S. Pritchett there referred to the short story as “one of the inextinguishable lost causes”, and spoke of the “economics of short-story writing” as “grim but eccentric.” And Francis King lamented: “No one reads short stories, much less buys them; no one makes money from them.”

Part of the blame for this state of affairs no doubt lies with the economics of publishing. Volumes of short stories are notoriously difficult to sell, and no magazine editor or book publisher wants to produce a volume that will only be sold at remaindered prices, if then. Equally, with so many writers aspiring to novels and historical studies, the Commonwealth Literary Fund, with its limited finances, seems averse to provide money to assist the writing of mere short stories. One of the more unfortunate results of this state of affairs is that too many writers, with material or imagination suitable for success in the short story medium, are producing instead over-long and patchy novels.

What is clearly needed, as much as anything, is a full recognition of the proper status of the short story. It’s neither an under-sized novel nor a piece by someone of necessarily minor talent. (It’s odd, isn’t it, the way the reverse prejudice has dominated thinking about poetry: it is the long poem that nobody reads or writes, and the short pieces that everyone can quote). It is, in fact, an art form on its own, inferior to the novel only in the matter of length. In many ways too the demands short story writing makes are greater than those faced by the average novelist. A novel, because of its length, can afford to be patchy in some parts, flawed in others. Nobody really minds, if in fact they remember by the time they finish. But short stories, like films, have to be consumed at a sitting; they have an immediacy and directness of impression more akin to poetry than to the novel. And it’s this unity of the experience which a short story offers that makes its creation such a demanding job. A single flaw or awkward sentence in a short story is painfully obvious, and bulks far larger in our
over-all opinion of the work than it would if it had occurred in a novel. The short story generally crystallises a single character or incident, and like the similar work of the miniaturist, it must be finished to perfection.

But trying to establish just what a short story is, is only part of the question. The stories themselves are clearly the most important thing. And we have only to compare, in a general sort of way, the stories in the two volumes of this anthology to find at least a partial explanation as to why the Australian short story has lost a good deal of its popular appeal. The stories in the first volume, *The Lawson Tradition*, tend to be primarily tales, with the essential aim of telling a story. Several are classics of this nature: Lawson’s “The Drovers Wife”, Steele Rudd’s “Starting the Selection” and Edward Dyson’s “A Golden Shanty”. Each of the three stories originally appeared in the *Bulletin* and each of the three authors was represented in the first major anthology of Australian short stories, *The Bulletin Story Book* (1901) edited by A. G. Stephens.

Indeed, it’s interesting to recall what Stephens wrote in his introduction to that anthology:

The stories and sketches which follow are usually the literary dreams of men of action, or the literary realisation of things seen by wanderers. Usually they are objective, episodic, detached — branches torn from the Tree of Life, trimmed and dressed with whatever skill the writers possess (which often is not inconsiderable). In most of them still throbs the keen vitality of the parent stem: many are absolute transcripts of the Fact, copied as faithfully as the resources of language will permit.

This then is the key to the success of the *Bulletin* style of story, “the Lawson tradition”: “objective, episodic, detached”, emanating from “men of action” and “wanderers”, “absolute transcripts” of actual events. This was the style that contributed to the tremendous popularity of the *Bulletin*, that made Henry Lawson a national hero, and which sold over a quarter of a million copies of *On Our Selection* in forty years.

But when we turn to the second volume of this recent anthology, *The Moderns*, it is clear that none of these terms used by Stephens will do. The emphasis has switched from the objective, detached story to a much more subjective picture, one in which the personality of the author and what he feels and believes are an integral part of the story. Incident for its own sake has given way to character portrayal and study, or social or moral satire. There are exceptions of course. Cecil Mann’s “The Pelican”, for instance, is modern in point of time only; stylistically it easily fits into “the Lawson tradition”. But generally the point is true.
One of the most regrettable results of this change in the nature of the short story has been, as already hinted, a decline in its popularity—from the point of view of both writers and readers. The modern story, with its emphasis more on people than events, seems more akin to the traditional forms of poetry than it does to the yarn or the tale. Indeed, as V. S. Pritchett implied, it seems to be hovering at the mouth of some cultural backwater, threatened with the same stagnant pools and solitary adventures as claimed modern verse long ago. As Thomas Keneally has remarked, the recent publication of Hal Porter’s collection of short stories, *The Cats of Venice*, caused hardly a stir. Had it been a novel of comparable stature, it would have created a furore.

Of course there are those who would argue that all that has happened is that the Australian short story has reached a point of excellence where it can appeal now only to an educated minority; that the fact that short stories are no longer widely read is only to be expected, if not applauded. Much the same argument, centred on modern poetry, has given rise to the many elitist cliques and attitudes which abound in the literary and academic worlds. Its basic weakness is that it acquires in a situation which can only be regarded as self-defeating, and that, arguing from the privilege of education, it refuses to extend that privilege to all.

What then is to be done? Need it, in fact, be a matter of great concern if the short story is relegated to our collection of literary fossils—along with the epic, the anatomy and the melodrama?

It would be a matter of great concern if this were to happen, and what is needed at the present time are more urgent and more decisive steps to prevent it from happening. It’s good to see, for instance, that collections of short stories are being increasingly used as texts for senior students in our High schools. How much better than those dreary collections of “essays” which served effectively to discourage reading. But this is not enough. What is also needed is a far greater range of publishing outlets for the short story writer than is now available, as well as grants and allowances to enable writers to devote the necessary time and effort to their work. All too often the short story has been looked upon as a sort of literary bubble-and-squeak—something you ran up in a hurry, when time and inspiration were short. A recognition of its proper status, as well as a practical boost to its flagging fortunes, would be for some public-minded person or institution to re-institute competitions among authors along the lines of the writers’ competitions the *Bulletin* used to run. And instead of awarding a great sum of money to what is obviously the best work, and leaving all the others unacknowledged (which is the unfortunate policy of the trustees of the Miles Franklin Award,
who seem to be addicted to short-priced favorites), surely a more encouraging and fruitful method would be also to give some sort of reward to those whose work may not yet be of top-class quality. Unless something like this is done, no doubt more and more potential short story writers will drift into the field of television script-writing—and make a good deal more money by doing so.

Having, it is trusted, established a case for concern over the future of the short story, let us look at our past achievement in this field as reflected in the two volumes of Short Stories of Australia.

Any anthology of short stories is bound to reveal omissions and inclusions which strike the reader as otiose or idiosyncratic. Certainly this anthology is no exception, and if Douglas Stewart's volume, The Lawson Tradition, strikes one as a more balanced selection than does Beatrice Davis' The Moderns, this is no doubt because Stewart, with a safety margin of some thirty-odd years, had the easier task. To look around with an anthologist's eye among stories written over the past few decades, largely by writers who are still living and producing work, as Miss Davis was asked to do, is no easy task. She herself speaks of the "injustice" which must be done, and the "false impressions" which must be given as part of "the occupational hazards and anxieties of any conscientious anthologist."

Mr. Stewart, with less cause but equal modesty, speaks also of "injustice" and "unkindness" in making his limited selection, and says that "it was simply not possible to include every writer who was worth considering." But he certainly seems to have included most of them. The stories of Lawson, Dyson and Steele Rudd have already been mentioned as among the best in the collection. In addition, it is as good to see the much neglected Price Warung in print again as it is to meet Henry Handel Richardson outside the pages of a lengthy novel. The inclusion of an extract from Norman Lindsay's novel Saturdee though seems a little odd—and Stewart's explanation for its inclusion is not entirely convincing. Many other novels also saw the light of day in the form of serial publication, but this seems little reason for regarding chapters from the finished product as short stories.

Towards the end of the volume The Lawson Tradition starts to pall a little too. One almost feels a sense of relief that "the moderns" stepped in when they did. What had been a new and exciting vein for Steele Rudd became very much an over-worked mine by the time James Hackston got around to it—and the inevitable result was a lot of hard work for little reward.
Perhaps too, in years to come, similar objections will be raised to some of the stories in *The Moderns*, but in the meantime the impression is one of diverse and manifold talent, even if, as several other reviewers have pointed out, the youngest contributor thought worthy of inclusion is now approaching forty. Should the book be called: *The Early Moderns*?

Quibbles like this though should not dim our appreciation of Miss Davis' achievement in assembling such a fine collection of stories. Within the limits she has set herself her selection leaves little to be desired. It's good to see too that she has interpreted "Australian" in a sufficiently broad sense to enable her to include the work of several expatriates—notably James Aldridge and Shirley Hazzard. Both of these are fine stories, and Aldridge's, for all its indebtedness to Hemingway, one of the most memorable in the book.

One main criticism of this second volume is that Miss Davis, unlike Douglas Stewart, has not seen fit (or perhaps has not had the space) to double up on the stories of major or important writers. As Stewart remarks in his introduction, "an anthology in which each contributor is represented by only a single story tends to be too levelling or muddling. To display a writer's range and variety... it is often desirable to put in at least two of his stories." In *The Moderns* one would quite willingly have traded the few second-rate stories for an extra one or two by any one of half a dozen major writers: James Aldridge, John Morrison, Hal Porter, Judah Waten or Patrick White.

To the superficial observer the publication of this handsome two volume anthology is likely to signal that all's well, and far from quiet, on the Australian short story front. If this is the impression given, then it is certainly a misleading one. Angus and Robertson deserve to be congratulated on producing an anthology from which they are no doubt counting on making as little profit as from their biennial *Coast to Coast*—that admirable collection of the best stories from each two-year period, which is due to appear again at the end of this year. But if *Short Stories Of Australia: The Lawson Tradition* and *The Moderns* has the success it deserves to have, then perhaps the diagnosis has been wildly wrong. One certainly hopes so.