

Futures of english studies: Australia

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Abstract

This paper considers the professionalization of literary studies in Australian universities. It traces ways in which its interdisciplinary formations have been shaped not only by the cultural contexts of colonialism and postcolonialism, but also by institutional factors and budgetary pressures. Nevertheless, it argues this framework has also created intellectual opportunities for positively reshaping the subject so as to bring it into discursive conversation with cognate fields. It suggests that the repositioning of Australian literature and literary studies in relation to World Literature may offer the prospect of opening up the field for the benefit of scholars the world over.

KEYWORDS

aesthetics, Australian literary studies, English studies, interdisciplinary, postcolonialism, professionalization, world literature

Australia, like many other countries, has suffered from the declining prestige and status of English studies that has been widely reported in recent years by many universities in Europe and the Americas. The general reasons underlying this increasingly precarious situation are by now well known. A harsher economic climate, particularly for young people, inclines them more towards a choice of degrees they believe will lead directly to well-paying jobs; but, more fundamentally, there has been a decline of interest and pleasure in reading among a new generation that has become much more accustomed to immersing themselves in screen narratives, Web sites and podcasts. Contemplating this changed media environment, James Shapiro, a professor of English at Columbia University in New York, remarked that “assigning *Middlemarch* in that climate was like trying to land a 747 on a small rural airstrip” (Heller, 2023). Higher education authorities in Australia have responded predictably enough to this rapid shift in student preferences, with the University of Sydney in 2019 choosing not to replace its established chair of Australian Literature—one of only two in the country, and indeed in the world—on the grounds that, as the Dean's Office put it in response to a press

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inquiry, they had “other priorities.” The specific nature of these “other priorities” was subsequently revealed by the appointment of several senior (and expensive) professors in the fields of Media and Communications.

This problem has been exacerbated in the Australian context owing to the fact that its funding model is driven almost exclusively by student demand, rather than being shaped by the institutional courses and curricula that have become embedded in more established universities elsewhere, especially in Europe. Any subject that attracts smaller numbers thus becomes immediately vulnerable in Australia to a Dean's budgetary scrutiny. Australia, like Asia, also suffers from a highly centralized system of research funding, dictated largely by government interests, through which research allocations are dispensed to universities not to support university departments that might remain relatively autonomous, but rather to underwrite specific projects that have received the imprimatur of the Australian Research Council (ARC). Though the ARC has attempted valiantly to preserve a measure of academic independence, it has come under severe pressure both from government ministers openly hostile to all theoretical endeavours other than those with an immediate practical payoff, and also from other parties who may not be so openly antagonistic, but who have nevertheless sought to direct university funding in accordance with what they conceive to be the wider national interest. This has meant again that apparently recondite areas such as textual scholarship, and indeed literary studies more generally, have tended to be shortchanged, with proposals centred on broader areas of media studies and a popular demographic being increasingly more likely to find favour with fiscal authorities who are always aware of their need to justify public funding. Lacking the private foundations (Leverhulme, Guggenheim) that have in other countries provided not only alternative sources of funding but, equally importantly, alternative ideological perspectives and pathways, the Australian system has become dangerously exposed to top-down government control, particularly since the Dawkins reforms of higher education in the late 1980s created what it called a “Unified National System.” This resulted in perhaps a more efficient system, one able to accommodate a larger number of students, but it was also one that soon became highly bureaucratized. Indeed, the eminent economist Max Corden, who worked in the United States during the 1990s before returning to Australia, described the Australian higher education system in 2005 as “Moscow on the Molonglo” (MacIntyre et al., 2017, p. 162).

None of this is new within the annals of higher education, of course, where there have been long-running battles between academic leadership and civic authorities going back to the sixteenth century, when Henry VIII plundered the monasteries and instructed his commissars to alter the theological parameters of the curriculum at Oxford and Cambridge so as to bring them into line with his own monarchical priorities. Indeed, many historians of higher education have pointed out that the most innovative contributions from universities, whether in theology during the Middle Ages or science during the Enlightenment, have occurred in spite of rather than because of endorsement from government agencies (Ridder-Symoens, 1996). Nevertheless, the political and economic infrastructure informing pedagogical arrangements in twenty-first-century Australia has produced particular challenges for literary studies, and a general reorientation of the field of English away from literary history and readings of authors from the past. There is now a strong tradition in Australian secondary education of privileging creative writing, resulting in a widespread assumption among parents and their offspring that pursuing an English degree effectively means you are training to be a writer rather than undertaking an intellectual course in literary history, with any requirements to read Chaucer or Shakespeare at risk of being considered unduly “elitist” and tangential to the primary goal of developing a student's subjectivist consciousness. This pedagogical shift has intersected in recent times with many important questions around the legitimization of previously marginalized voices, and it is linked in complex ways to ongoing political controversies around the Indigenous “Voice” to parliament. Yet populist polemics such as Bri Lee's *Who Gets to be Smart* (Lee, 2021), which lambasts “expensive” literary education as a site of self-indulgent privilege and a cradle of social hierarchy while flying the flag instead for the “intelligence” and authenticity of personal stories outside the framework of the Western canon, inevitably means that the idea of literary heritage per se has become a site of contention within Australian educational practice (Lee, 2021, p. 43). This is not a question simply of “culture wars,” of the kind that took place in American universities during the late 1980s and early 1990s, when there was the first systematic attempt to include more women and writers of colour in the university curriculum; in the Australian context, it relates more to the relevance or otherwise of any literary precursor. Often, curiously enough, these

controversies seem to be more heated in relation to literature than the other arts. Shakespeare is disparaged as a dead white male in a way that does not seem to occur with equal venom or frequency to a venerable musician such as Beethoven or a visual artist such as Raphael.

Part of the reason for such sensitivities can perhaps be traced to the fraught history of English studies in Australia, which was introduced in the early twentieth century as a nakedly colonial enterprise. E. R. Holme, McCaughey Chair of Early English Literature and Language at the University of Sydney between 1920 and 1940, reportedly in his lectures used Sweet's *Anglo-Saxon Primer* "as a text for a series of sermons on the virtues of Empire" (Dale, 1997, p. 67). This in turn led to a sharp reaction later in the twentieth century in the work of Bill Ashcroft, Helen Tiffin and others, who were keen to reconsider English cultural hegemony from a postcolonial perspective and to point out the implicit power relations involved in the dissemination of literary value from a metropolitan centre. The latter work became very influential on a wider academic stage, critically elucidating the unequal dynamics involved in literary scholarship across a global compass, and it also helped to shape the ambience of antagonism that still hovers around literary studies in Australia today. On a more positive note, though, this postcolonial agenda also highlighted one of the most striking and innovative features about Australian scholarship in English studies, which has been its capacity to make connections between literature and cognate fields. The academic field of English in Australia has always covered questions of language as well as literature, as E. R. Holme's title ("Chair of Early English Literature and Language") clearly demonstrates. However, intersections with cultural studies, media studies, feminism and, more recently, digital humanities have not only broadened the scope of Australian literary scholarship but also increased the impact of the subject upon the wider world. To take just a couple of examples of this, Germaine Greer completed a B.A. in English at the University of Melbourne before her Ph.D. in Elizabethan literature at Cambridge, and she has of course gone on to become a highly influential figure in feminist cultural criticism. More recently, Rita Felski read French and German literature for her first degree at Cambridge, but then did a Ph.D. in German at Monash University in Australia and took her first job at Murdoch University in Perth, Western Australia, before moving to the University of Virginia in the United States. Felski's recent work (Felski, 2015) on the importance of affect and emotion in critical responses to literature bears many affinities with Australian traditions of Cultural Studies, and this broadening of the intellectual base can be understood as a significant by-product of the interrogation of disciplinary and periodizing boundaries that has been integral to much of the best Australian literary scholarship.

In this sense, the financial retrenchments across the board in English studies, which have made each period and subfield less self-sufficient, also offer scope for making new intellectual connections of various kinds. While there have been many laments among literary scholars for the loss of financial stability in recent decades, such largesse also produced a tendency to institutional complacency and blindspots during these times of plenty. Gerald Graff commented on how the ubiquity of New Critical readings in the classroom during the Cold War era created a sense of stagnant "routine," where the pedagogical culture was often dull even if student numbers were high, with professors distributing copies of "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and assuring their classroom that close readings were more important than any pedantic contextualizations (Graff, 1987, p. 227). Whatever the rights and wrongs of this theoretical approach, it had the effect of fostering academic inertia in many quarters, and this inward looking quality was prevalent in research as well as teaching. After World War II, the United States was awash with foundation money to support highly professionalized teams of experts who specialized in the production of variorum editions of canonical authors: the 23 volumes of Nathaniel Hawthorne's works, produced in the 1950s and 1960s by Ohio State University Press, is one classic example of this phenomenon. But the ready availability of such resources also had the detrimental effect of producing a generation of scholars who were sometimes unable to recognize anything outside the purview of the national narrative (or, on occasions, the individual author) they had chosen for their specialization. Though for F. R. Leavis and his *Scrutiny* group in the mid-twentieth century "English was the central discipline of the humanities, just as theology had been queen of the sciences in the Middle Ages" (Bergonzi, 1991, p. 56), such an elevated status could create its own logistical difficulties. The obvious advantage that English Studies enjoyed between about 1950 and 1980 was that jobs were relatively plentiful and many young scholars were able to enter the profession, but the state of the subject itself has always been inconsistent and uneven.

The same is also true today, of course, when different economic models result in a similarly wide spectrum of advantages and disadvantages. For all the intellectual possibilities opened up for literary studies in Australia through cross-fertilization of various kinds, there have also been significant risks for the field incumbent upon its instrumentalization and diminished status. These have been particularly apparent when literary studies have found themselves accommodated within interdisciplinary clusters dictated by central management in the hope of generating government grant income. The “Health Humanities” cluster recently developed by the University of Western Australia, (2022), which describes itself as “research at the intersection of humanities, health education and practice,” and where “the study of Renaissance plays is facilitated by moved readings [offering] students and other participants new ways to experience and explore ideas concerning emotions, human nature, and our relationships to each other,” is just one example of the widespread subjugation of professional literary scholarship and academic expertise to pedagogical imperatives whose public-facing quality makes them (supposedly) attractive to sponsors. This “Renaissance Moved Reading Project” appears to play with the idea of Renaissance drama being “moved” into a contemporary context, at the same time as making the texts moving in an emotional sense. At any rate, it clearly involves an instrumental approach to literary history, one designed to “explore questions around the purpose of the humanities and literature, specifically as it pertains to human health and wellbeing.” This kind of formulation has become even more common since the COVID crisis ensured that government research funds were increasingly directed away from the Humanities and towards medical sciences, but it risks marginalizing any literary work deemed to be unsettling or disturbing rather than conducive to “wellbeing.”

Despite such dangers of reductiveness, one of the most productive developments in literary studies everywhere over the past generation has been its capacity to make discursive juxtapositions across heterodox domains. Postcolonial studies flourished through connecting apparently incommensurable subjects—Virginia Woolf and Africa, for example—and it could be plausibly argued that it is more productive to read literature of all kinds in comparative and parallel formations. Australian literature itself looks less rich and interesting if considered merely in isolation, although of course such extraneous perspectives risk impinging upon local scholarly fiefdoms. The novelist Peter Carey, for example, has sometimes been dismissed by scholars of Australian literature for being insufficiently “Australian” after his move to New York in 1990, even though his intellectual trajectory and interactions with Salman Rushdie and others have enabled him to resituate his native traditions within a more cosmopolitan rubric of magical realism. This is not, of course, to undervalue the importance of local knowledge per se, and indeed the relative importance of different vantage points will always be a source of significant and illuminating controversy in literary criticism. But the selection in 2021 by a French education jury of Alexis Wright’s novel *Carpentaria* (Wright, 2006) as a compulsory book to be studied on the *agrégation* curriculum has provided an occasion for reconsidering her Indigenous Australian heritage from an international perspective, and this will provoke complex questions to which both French intellectual traditions of rational cosmopolitanism and Australian traditions of genealogical inheritance and environmentalism should be able to contribute something valuable. The enhanced opportunities for global conversations brought about by the Internet and other twenty-first-century information technologies will also, over time, serve to bring different geographical locations closer together. In this sense, despite the manifold challenges imposed by government and university bureaucracies, there are also plentiful opportunities for English studies in Australia and elsewhere to make an impact across global space.

Thus the biggest challenge for the subject of English in Australia, I would suggest, is not so much administrative as intellectual and ideological. The subject needs to make a convincing case for literary studies to a public that is instinctively sceptical towards concepts it believes to be opaque, outdated or unapproachable. Stephen Greenblatt in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* described “great art” as “an extraordinarily sensitive register of the complex struggles and harmonies of culture” (Greenblatt, 1980, p. 5), and while re-reading Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* for a public radio assignment earlier this year, I was struck by the profound insights his novel offers into the thought processes, psychological divisions and structural ambivalences of Russia in the nineteenth century, a capacious and panoramic vision that far exceeds any explanation of the same terrain furnished by more empirical narratives of history or social science. There has been a tendency among university administrators in Australia to dismiss literature as either an aristocratic

pastime, along the lines of opera, or as anachronistic, like theology, or both; indeed, a recent vice-chancellor at the University of Queensland declared openly that nobody needs another book on Shakespeare and that universities should instead be investing taxpayers' money in more useful areas. Scott Morrison as prime minister of Australia between 2018 and 2022 epitomized this kind of blunt anti-intellectualism, but such disenfranchisement of artistic templates was also implicitly corroborated, albeit on a more sophisticated level, by the Australian-based scholar Tony Bennett, who, following the lead of Pierre Bourdieu, has sought to emphasize sociological layers of habit within cultural formations, while correspondingly taking issue with "the assumption that literature comprises a special kind of writing that is to be considered aesthetically." Opposing its putatively hierarchical claim to be a "special" language, Bennett described "literature" as "more appropriately regarded as a historically specific, institutionally organised field of textual uses and effects" (Bennett, 1990, pp. 4–5, 9), one associated with a form of elite "self-fashioning" (Bennett, 2010, p. 273).

But to demystify "the establishment of art's autonomy," in the way Bennett plausibly and effectively does (Bennett, 2010, p. 265), is not at all the same as to render art simply superfluous or redundant. Greenblatt's argument was not that great art is dissociated from culture, but that it affords new angles on culture which would not necessarily be available through other media forms or disciplinary matrices. Though specific expertise in textual analysis or critique has frequently been regarded in Australia as a sign of reactionary politics, there is no inherent reason to make such equations. In *Professing Criticism* (2022), John Guillory explained that his title involved something of a contradiction in terms, since English as an academic subject was founded in the late-nineteenth century on principles of textual scholarship and philology, with criticism during this period being associated with more amateur, impressionistic ventures. It was, said Guillory, not until 1950 that the word "criticism" was added to its constitutional statement of purpose by the MLA, the Modern Language Association of America, which is now the peak body for the academic profession of literary studies in the United States. But Guillory argued that criticism should seek to recover what he called the "Baconian sweep" that characterized its intellectual style in earlier eras, rather than relapsing into the "professional deformation" too often arising from intellectual incarceration within overly rigid "period specializations" (Guillory, 2022, pp. 49, 355, 68). Given the rich tradition in Australian literary scholarship of making creative connections with other critical and contextual formations, it is possible that Australian literary scholarship, if driven by robust intellectual agendas rather than just a meek adherence to government mandates, might be well placed to point a way forward for academic literary studies. There is a long-standing larrikin spirit in Australian culture and scholarship, one groaning recently under the weights of regulation and conformity, but a resilient and inventive force nevertheless. Throughout history all cutbacks and transitions have also provided new opportunities, and the reconfiguration of literary studies in terms of more flexible subfields, even if driven in part by economic constraints, can also potentially open the door to new horizons.

The other major structural advantage enjoyed by English studies in Australia can be linked to the ubiquity of English as a global language. David Crystal estimated in 2003 that about a quarter of the world's population was fluent or competent in English; English has about 360 million for whom it is a first language, a relatively small number, but around two billion for whom it is a second language. This pattern is diametrically opposite to that of Mandarin Chinese, the world's second most popular language, which has about 1.4 billion native speakers but comparatively few for whom it is a supplementary language. Spanish and Hindi, the world's third and fourth languages, have far fewer speakers overall, at 500 and 322 million respectively (Crystal, 2003, p. 6). Though the great majority of those who speak English as a second language undoubtedly do so for merely practical purposes, this still offers a vast global market within which the language can circulate. In terms of population, Australia is a relatively small country, with a total of about 26 million, and so it is not altogether surprising that the biggest student audience for Australian literature is found not in Australia itself but in China, whose population of 1.4 billion currently includes around 44 million students, with around 240 million Chinese people all told having received some form of higher education during their lifetime. Australia is of particular interest to the Chinese as a significant Anglophone community in the Asia-Pacific region they share, with Indigenous and environmental traditions making Australia idiosyncratic and anomalous within the English-speaking postcolonial world.

The establishment of English departments in every corner of the world, usually under the banner of “Foreign Languages” but often also including literary study, increases the prospect of a viable and meaningful reciprocal exchange between subject specialists in countries where English is the first language and places where it is not. Again, such exchanges are relatively easy to facilitate in an era when developments in information technology have made cross-border dialog more convenient and cheaper. The increasing visibility and internationalization of Australian literature as an academic field of study will over time introduce new critical perspectives that will surely enliven the subject, even if some curmudgeonly nativist scholars might continue to complain about how overseas readers tend to get things wrong. Such protectionist impulses are familiar enough, but there has of course been a long tradition of canonical English authors being re-read in provocative and illuminating ways by non-English scholars: Jan Kott on Shakespeare (Kott, 1965) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick on Jane Austen (Sedgwick, 1991) come immediately to mind. In this sense, the various forms of critical displacement through which Australian literature and Australian literary scholarship will find themselves integrated more fully into a world system should ultimately be beneficial for all parties. There have also been understandable concerns expressed that the specific identity of Australian writing might find itself marginalized or erased in more abstract invocations of “World Literature,” with a risk of local conditions being folded into a more “homogenising” view of Oceania (Sharrad, 2013, p. 30); but this will not necessarily be the case, provided again that Australian writers and scholars produce a sufficiently compelling case for their own particular vantage points to be heeded. The current popularity of Alexis Wright in France and elsewhere testifies to ways in which antipodean perspectives can help to shape emerging conceptions of global indigeneity and World Literature beyond the subject’s default Eurocentric or North American settings. It makes no more sense to circumscribe literary scholarship within national boundaries than it would to contain medical research within national parameters.

Higher education in Australia more generally has over recent years experienced similar challenges to those faced by other advanced countries. There is now a pragmatic need to educate a much greater percentage of young people to a tertiary level so as to allow them to participate efficiently in a digital economy driven by the manipulation of information; indeed, the Australian Minister for Education, Jason Clare, said in September 2023 that nine out of 10 jobs created over the next 10 years would require some form of tertiary education (Clare, 2023). Around 50% of 19 year olds in Australia now enter some form of higher education, a massive increase from the 20% of 50 years ago, though still some way short of the 60% that characterizes Taiwan, South Korea and other parts of Asia (Education and Work, 2002). At the same time, there has been an unwillingness from political parties of all persuasions to invest a correspondingly higher percentage of the gross national product in the university sector, a tension exacerbated by changing demographic patterns that have placed more pressure on budgets for pensions, health and care of the elderly. These issues are also common to the United Kingdom and other parts of Europe, and they have in Australia evoked critical commentary around questions of intergenerational equity. Nevertheless, since English is a compulsory subject in Australian high schools, there are now large numbers of young people who arrive at university with some experience in this area, even if the many varieties of the subject mean there is no consistent body of expertise and few first-year university students will have had prior exposure to formal textual studies. They will, however, have been generally well schooled in cognate fields; Foucault is widely taught in Australian high schools, and indeed Peter Carey once complained that Australian students typically learn how to decode a novel before they learn how to read it (Carey, 2010).

The goal of English studies in Australia should thus be to make creative connections with these alternative disciplinary domains, while emphasizing how the contributions of literature do not represent merely a soft option, but offer instead the kind of cognitive value and imaginative horizons that cannot readily be replicated in other fields. This larger ambition should extend to academic research as well as teaching. While funding arrangements and institutional organizations will always be haphazard and vulnerable to short-term political interests, the best scholarship has over the centuries always found a way to dodge the bullets and leave an enduring legacy. The most promising aspect of literary studies in Australia lies not in its current patchy actualization but in its intellectual potential, the capacity it carries to move beyond what historian Geoffrey Blainey in 1966 (Blainey, 1966) called the old “tyranny of distance” and enter into generative dialog with literary scholarship the world over.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Open access publishing facilitated by Australian Catholic University, as part of the Wiley - Australian Catholic University agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

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How to cite this article: Giles, P. (2023). Futures of english studies: Australia. *Literature Compass*, e12747.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.12747>