CRITICS, REVIEWERS AND ABORIGINAL WRITERS

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It is only very recently that literary critics and historians have been faced with the new phenomenon of Aboriginal writing in what have been traditionally their fields. The question of what critical standards they are to apply to this new literature and history is a thorny one, and has already become something of a battleground.

The 'literature of protest' in Western terms has of course a long history of its own. Minorities, and individuals, who feel themselves oppressed by the dominance of elements in their own society have often been able to express that sense within the literary modes and conventions of that society. But in the case of Aboriginal writers – part of an indigenous enclave of people within a society whose standards and criteria, as well as language, they may not feel the slightest compulsion to take as models – something new faces the critic working within his or her own literary tradition and culture. For the critic of today, a new tenderness of conscience may demand a questioning of critical method and a new look at literary styles and standards as they may be seen by the writer working wholly outside the acceptations of Western culture.

Some critics and reviewers have chosen to stick to their lasts and speak *de haut en bas* as the standard-setters of a culture to which these new contributors must submit themselves. They apparently feel themselves unable, even unwilling, to accept a need to evolve a different aesthetic and critical method to take account of the aims, strengths and limitations of indigenous protest writing. They would presumably insist that an established literature and a language impose their own necessities, and that judgements can only be made in the terms they have laid down. But it is an uneasy position, and one that a colonising culture such as ours is increasingly forced to question.

By what divine right have we established our own critical standards? Our long traditions of critical writing, for instance about poetry or the novel or the short story, are adapted to deal with the conditions and traditions of a social development very different from any milieu which Aboriginal writers live in or have to draw upon. And they are brief indeed when compared with the traditions of Aboriginal language, oral literature, oral history, evolved within a wholly different world-picture – one moreover which we have ignorantly despised and in most cases and places destroyed altogether. Can we apply the critical standards we use in evaluating new contributions to our own literature by those who inherit and live within the dominant culture and language, to those who have had no such education, training and background – and who, moreover, may bitterly and thoroughly reject all the bland assumptions of that culture and feel that language an alien imposition?

Honest critics may have to admit that the tools of their trade – their education in linguis-

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tic and critical methods, their expertise in the history and growth of the literature of the West, their knowledge of structural and grammatical practice and their own sensitivity and judgement within their literary background — need re-examining if they are to apply them to the literatures of protest without embarrassment. Critics are not, they may argue, equipped with political or social expertise. If Aboriginal writing is to be regarded as a 'special case' for which allowances must be made, they want nothing to do with such muddying of the waters of critical judgement by questions of morality, politics, and historical revision. Unfortunately, this critical dilemma can result in a refusal to try to criticise the work at all. So the Aboriginal voice, with all it has to say to us, may be silenced by critical consent.

If the critic of the drama, poetry and the novel is faced with new problems, what about the critic of historical writing? Here again, immense questions wait to be raised.

Some are visible in Sean Regan's review of James Miller's book, *Koori: a will to win, in Overland*.¹ Regan chooses to take his stand on the criteria of Western historical method and 'disinterestedness' in recording 'the facts'; and on these grounds objects to Miller's 'lack of methodological consistency', his 'playing fast and loose with the facts' and his 'double standards' in regarding verbal communication from Europeans as 'hearsay evidence' and from Aborigines as 'oral history'. 'Dispensing with considered academic judgements, he can simply trade in invective . . . None of this would matter if the book was only intended as propaganda', writes Regan. 'But it is also being pushed as serious history.'

Now let us look at some of the work which has in the past been 'pushed as serious history' by early — and sometimes by late — Australian historians. Stephen Roberts's *The squatting age in Australia* — my edition March 1964 but practically unchanged from the original (1935) edition — was part of the historical education of most students of Australian history as late as twenty years ago. Its first indexed mention of Aborigines (p.87) is under Gipps's governorship in 1839, by which time of course the Hunter Valley had long been occupied, with very considerable bloodshed and deep controversy over land occupation, without treaty or compensation by the occupiers — a cause, among others, of the virtual dismissal of the first Attorney-General of New South Wales, Saxe Bannister, in 1826. (Bannister does not rate a mention in Roberts's history.) This ignoring of all previous Aboriginal resistance to occupation by whites allows Roberts *carte blanche* in dealing with the notorious Myall Creek case. His account of the 'rule of terror' in the 'new districts' attributes the terrorisation to the side of the Aboriginal occupiers of the land: 'scarcely a mail arrived, scarcely a party got through, without news of native-outrages', while under Gipps's governorship — so unpopular with the squatters — '[t]he natives became unbearably impudent . . . seven or eight years of virtual terror set in after 1837', Aborigines were 'completely amoral and usually incapable of sincere and prolonged gratitude' (p.333). Though Roberts admits that 'rumours of atrocities by squatting parties' were frequent and that there was 'some degree of truth' in rumours of undue cruelty, his account of the confrontations is scarcely lacking in double standards or disinterested in recording the facts. The dominant historical culture can hardly claim the kind of objectivity Regan demands of James Miller — Roberts was Challis Professor of History at Sydney University, the most respected in Australia, influential for years after his retirement.

Moreover, written records for the first decades of the occupation of the Hunter Valley

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and the outside districts are few, and for the most part made by those whose livelihood was threatened by the Aboriginal resistance. Does 'objectivity' lie with those who had a monopoly of the written record, or with those who already had an oral tradition and good cause to remember the treatment they received?

Historians, then, as well as literary critics, are having problems in setting up criteria of objectivity in Australian, and Aboriginal, history. In our bicentennial year, it is urgent to address them.

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