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# The "Jindyworobaks:" Finding Home in the Language of the Other

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**Abstract**: This paper addresses the search for an Australian authenticity and differentiation in the work of the South Australian-based Jindyworobak group of poets who, in the late 1930s, sought to escape from the "intellectual colonialism of modernism." Influenced by D.H. Lawrence's "spirit of place" they promoted, through their 1938 Manifesto and influential annual *Jindyworobak Anthology* (1938-1953), local and environmental values drawing on *topoi* from inland Australian landscapes and motifs from imagined indigenous life and language, largely unknown to most Australian settlers. While their experiment was mainly unsuccessful, the paper shows how Jindyworobak sympathies for "a neglected people" foreshadow the return to indigenous themes and forms in settler writing from the 1980s, notably by Les Murray, David Malouf and Alex Miller. The paper underlines, nonetheless, the sensitivities surrounding writing about the Other. It points to Malouf's interest, as a writer of non-English language descent, in the loss of language, a variant of "homelessness," recurring in contemporary settler and migrant writing, and central to the work of Aboriginal writer Kim Scott.

**Keywords:** Jindyworobaks, authenticity, differentiation, place, appropriation, Other

## Introduction

In 1989, in the post-colonial text *The Empire Writes Back,* Bill Ashcroft and his fellow authors asked: "What does home mean in the disrupted world of colonial space? How can "home" become the transformative habitation of boundaries? For certainly that "unheimlichkeit," that "unhousedness" or "uncanniness" which characterizes much colonial displacement, is a primary source of disruption in post -colonial life" (218). "Home" (and belonging) are concepts shifting beyond the traditional boundaries of home and colony, Europe and the New World, centre and periphery. They are also culturally inflected, and often problematic: that which is "homely," "regional" or "local" can be inextricably linked with difficult questions of identity, essentialism and authenticity.

## Jindyworobak Manifesto

Some fifty years earlier, in pre post-colonial days, the Jindyworobak group of writers based in South Australia attempted to define what might constitute an authentic Australian literature and culture. In its manifesto of 1938, largely penned by its leader Rex Ingamells, the group promoted a recognition of the local, the reflection of environmental values and the use of imagery drawing upon Australian history and tradition especially those of the Aboriginal people. Peter Pierce identified this as part of a wider trend during the between-wars period in Australia, perhaps in reaction to World War I, in the search for the real Australia, a "gaze inward" to the little known geographic interior and "backward" to Australia's

little understood past (141-2). It can be seen as a revival of the "country or the bush" debate seen in Australian writing fostered in the 1890s by the *Bulletin.* We should also note that the Jindyworobak manifesto in large part joined the earlier manifesto of June 1935 of scholar and activist P. R. Stephenson in attacking the British-born Professor of English at Melbourne University G. H. Cowling for his denigration of Australian literature in 1935 in his letter to the Melbourne *Age* of 16 February 1935.

This paper addresses the Jindyworobak experiment with new, local *topoi* and indigenous language, with a view to evoking what D.H. Lawrence had called "the spirit of place," and against what has been described as the "intellectual colonialism" of contemporary European modernism (Dobson 377). In what might be called pre post-colonial settler writing they offered a more sympathetic perspective about the "neglected" Aboriginal people, foreshadowing the turn of settler writers to indigenous themes in the mid-1980s as well as prefiguring an environmental consciousness.

Key elements of the Jindyworobak's pamphlet manifesto *Conditional Culture* (1938) are cited below. The personal voice reflected is Ingamell's:

> "Jindyworobak" is an aboriginal word meaning "to annex, to join" and I propose to coin it for a particular use. The Jindyworobaks, I say are those individuals who are endeavouring to free Australian art from whatever alien influences trammel it, that is, to bring it into proper contact with its material. They are the few who seriously realize that an Australian culture depends on the fulfillment and sublimation of certain definite conditions, namely:
>
> 1. A clear recognition of environmental values.
> 2. The debunking of much nonsense
> 3. An understanding of Australia's history and traditions, primaeval, colonial and modern. (Ingamells and Tilbrook 5)

The manifesto paid tribute to the "natural distinctiveness of the Australian continent," the "indestructible spirit of place" about which D. H. Lawrence had written in a piece of description at the beginning of "Kangaroo". It argued that, unlike Lawrence, who "did not feel at home in the Australian bush," Australians genuinely felt the "beauty and utter loveliness of the outback environment" but needed a "suitable thought-idiom" to express their "thought-contact with nature" (Ingamells and Tilbrook 5). Ingamells and Tilbrook argued against a subservience to "Old World imagery" (8) or the "spirit and idiom of English poetry" (7) to evoke what he described as Australia's "primaevalism:" "From Aboriginal art and song we must learn much of our new technique; from Aboriginal legend, sublimated through our thought we must achieve something of a pristine outlook on life" (18). In these arguments the Jindyworobaks were clearly rehearsing later post-colonial arguments about the "lack of 'fit' between language and place" (Ashcroft et al., "Place" 345).

**A Rural "Real"**

The Jindyworobaks could be said to offer a local perspective, of the more rural, or "real and homelier," South Australia (Elliott, *The Jindyworobaks* lxiv), to counter the more urban cosmopolitan centres of Sydney and Melbourne. They comprised the South Australian poets Rex Ingamells, Ian Mudie, Ian Tilbrook, Max Harris (briefly before he became involved in the *Angry Penguins* group) and Wilfred Flexmore Hudson and later the novelists James Devaney and Nancy Cato, and poet Victor Kennedy. The group's leading figure Ingamells had been born in rural South Australia, and his turn towards Aboriginal culture had been inspired by a visit to central Australia, reading the work of late nineteenth and early twentieth century anthropologists Walter Baldwin Spencer and Francis Gillen[1] and a meeting with the linguist T. G. H. Strehlow, expert on the languages of the indigenous central Australian Arrernte/Arunta people. Ingamells' poetry had been inspired by James Devaney's book *The Vanished Tribes.* Apart from Roland Robinson the degree of the writers' connection with the indigenous people and their familiarity with Australian literature was in most cases minimal. Brian Elliott considered it a "mostly bookish" movement (*The Jindyworobaks* lxiv). The group did not agree on all elements of the Jindyworobak project: for example, Flexmore Hudson maintained doubts about its indigenous aspect. Nonetheless, it was with an indigenous-inspired approach to language, subject matter and thematic focus aimed at evoking a distinctively primaeval sense of Australian place that the Jindyworobak poets proceeded in their project of literary renewal.

Some of Ingamell's first poetic efforts offered a powerful, even imagistic, rendering of the dry inland landscapes, of its indigenous people and also of the disappearing bush worker, the itinerant swagman, the iconic figure of Australia's 1890s:

> Green valleys for white flocks of sheep;
> Red deserts for black crows;
> Dark billabongs for light of stars . . .
> And me for all of those.
> ("The Swagman," *Selected Poems* 103)

**Borrowing Place/Language**

The imagistic approach might be explained as a primordial attraction to the naming of place as described by Paul Carter in his essay "Naming Place:" "It was the names themselves that brought history into being, that invented the spatial and conceptual co-ordinates within which history could occur" (353). While often celebratory, Ingamells' poetics was almost consistently elegiac, in its lyrical but also at times prosaic and nostalgic vision of the passing of the traditional life of the indigenous tribes and also of a rural economy:

[1] *The Arunta* (1927) is a synthesis of work of late 19th and early 20th century anthropologists Spencer and Gillen.

> After the white man came, the black man lost
> His hunting-grounds and camping-grounds. He went,
> Lonelier and lonelier, pitilessly tossed,
> By fates he knew not, into banishment.
>
> His waterholes were stolen or defiled,
> And all his sacred *tjurungas*[2] were tainted:
> He went not stalking when the wan dawn smiled,
> And came not to corroboree, weird-painted. ("Forgotten People," *Selected Poems* 49, original emphasis)

While noting the group's seemingly nativist pastoral project, Ivor Indyk has commented that unlike the Greek original, this Australian vision of an "arcadian Aboriginal existence" is not pastoral but is "haunted and usually overwhelmed by spectres of death and dispossession" (358). As Robert Sellick has remarked, the writing on aboriginality at the time leading up to the Jindyworobaks was tinged with sentiments of settler guilt and complicity at what was accepted as the impending disappearance of the Aboriginal people (108).

In several early poems Ingamells experimented more boldly with the use of Aboriginal languages, place names, objects and technical words related to Aboriginal law as can be seen in the poem "Moorawathimeering" two stanzas of which are cited below:

> Into moorawathimeering,
> where atninga dare not tread,
> leaving wurly for a wilban,
> tallabilla, you have fled.
>
> Wombalunga curses, waitjurk—
> Though we cannot break the ban,
> And follow tchidna any further
> After one-time karaman. ("Moorawathimeering," Selected Poems 63)

The words from this poem translated below do not appear near the poem but in the glossary at the end of Ingamells' *Selected Poems:*

| | |
|---|---|
| moorawathimeering | Land of the Lost |
| atninga | vengeance party |

[2] *Tjurungas* signify sacred relics, objects of ceremonial significance.

| | |
|---|---|
| wilban | cave |
| tallabilla | outlaw |
| wombalunga | carry |
| waitjurk | murderer |
| tchidna | footprint |
| karaman | leader |

Eight glossed words for two stanzas is considerable.

The immediate problem presented is that the poem is dense with words, albeit sonorous, inscribed by a white settler writer who, with his audience, did not really understand them. Also, as Elliott and Sellick have commented, these and much of the language used by Jindyworobak poets was often unable to be clearly traced to any particular Aboriginal language (Sellick 109-11) and for that reason suggested a world with "little contact with reality" (Sellick 111). The language used by Ingamells in many but not all cases can be sourced to Devaney's own rather amorphous text *The Vanished Tribes*. Looking at their project through a posterior post-colonial lens, the Jindyworobak's broad attempts at linguistic renewal and also their choice of indigenous subject matter must be seen as acts of cultural appropriation. Sellick has commented how the very meaning of the word "jindyworobak" can be traced to Devaney's *The Vanished Tribes* (108). This meaning, spelt out on page four of the manifesto as "to annex or join," Sellick argues "carries with it the sense of appropriation" (105). This might be seen as the Jindyworobak's attempt at what Chantal Zabus later describes as "relexification"—"the making of a new register of communication out of an alien lexicon" (285). However, notwithstanding the Jindyworobak's noble motives, such an approach could only be seen as inappropriate, and inauthentic in the hands of settler writers. It would not be the desired repudiation or abrogation of the language of the centre by the Other, but rather the reverse, an appropriation of Other language by representatives of the centre.

**On Being Australian**

Humphrey McQueen considered it easy at the time for literary contemporaries to satirise the Jindyworobak's efforts at mythological and cultural renewal (32). The former Jindyworobak and subsequent avant-garde surrealist poet and editor Max Harris compared their Aboriginalist diction with Lewis Carroll's nonsense poem "Jabberwocky" (262). The increasingly influential poet and critic A. D. Hope described the group itself as the "Boy Scout Group of Poetry" in view of their taste for the primitive and the open air (248). His colleague poet James McAuley would attack, in the Jindyworobaks and more broadly, what he saw as "the disease of cultural nationalism … [those] … seeking substitute religious gratification in the pantheistic embrace of an Australian Erdgeist" ("The Grinning Mirror" 67). McAuley judged this obsession with Australianity as a mark of the "stultifying effect of the cultural climate" that so many Australian writers "showed an incapacity to deal with themes of permanent and universal importance" (67). In a perhaps lighter spirit McAuley, in 1944/45, wrote a satiric poem on the then flourishing Jindyworobak group titled "Jindyworobaksheesh" (*Collected Poems 1936-1970*, 29)

Nonetheless, it should be added, as McQueen has noted, that Ingamells rapidly dropped his early experimentation with an indigenous idiom, almost certainly intuiting the difficulties it raised (32).

Max Harris, more famous as the editor of the initially South Australian-based avant-garde surrealist magazine *Angry Penguins*[3] had only two years earlier been launched as a founding Jindyworobak poet in the first edition of *The Jindyworobak Anthology* in 1938. James McAuley, better known as co-author of the "Ern Malley" hoax poems and, later, Catholic lyric and classicist poems, also had his early Jindyworobak phase manifested in his two 1940 poems "Envoi" and "Terra Australis," published in the Jindyworobak anthologies of 1940 and 1943. His poems conform with Jindyworobak-approved *topoi* of Australian fauna, exploration and a home-oriented vision. In the second stanza of "Terra Australis" the speaker imagines mythical Australia in the mind of the visionary Portuguese explorer Captain Quiros, curiously already furnished with iconic local knowledge:

> It is your land of similes: the wattle
> Scatters its pollen on the doubting heart;
> The flowers are wide-awake; the air gives ease.
> There you come home; the magpies call you Jack
> And whistle like larrikins at you from the trees.
> ("Terra Australis," *Collected Poems 1936-1970,* 16)

McAuley later told A. D. Hope that his Jindyworobak phase poems reflected how difficult it was for writers in the late 1930s and early 1940s to "ignore the challenge of 'what being an Australian was'" (McAuley, "Letter" to A.D. Hope 1/12/1959, A.D. Hope Papers). His contemporary Rosemary Dobson has described how the group, resisting European modernism, strongly defended the local, urging an improvement of the level of descriptive writing in Australia (377). Other important emerging poets not part of the Jindyworobak group, including Judith Wright and Francis Webb were also given important early promotion through the group's annual anthology (1938—1953), which in its first years was the only annual poetry anthology in Australia.

The group would be commended later, including by their fiercest mocker A. D. Hope, for bringing attention to the perspective and plight of a forgotten and neglected people. McQueen commented on the Jindyworobak's early prescient support for environmental values during a time of crisis involving the near-destruction of European civilization (34). Brian Elliott described their reaching towards an indigenous apprehension of an Australian "spirit of place" (*The Jindyworobaks* xxx). Reflecting the arrival in Australia of the international modernist fascination with the primitive, the influence of Aboriginal *topoi* and mythology, and the landscape of the interior was not limited to the literary sphere but was also significant in contemporary visual arts in Australia in the 1930s and 1940s, notably in the

[3] *Angry Penguins* was subsequently based in Melbourne after receiving sponsorship from art patron John Reed.

work of painter and printer Margaret Preston and also the painter Russell Drysdale. Preston's work was influenced by Aboriginal art and the landscape of the dry interior. This is reflected in the cover page she produced for the pamphlet publication of Ian Mudie's prize-winning *The Australian Dream*,[4] (Preston 280).

**Transl(iter)ation/Rewriting**

Like Rex Ingamells, fellow Jindyworobak Roland Robinson, also used Aboriginal language in his poetry, as if in abrogation of the language of the imperial centre, but in a much more diluted manner than Ingamells' early poem "Moorawathimeering." Robinson's use was usually limited to proper nouns, in some moving evocations of what was clearly a disappearing way of life. An elegiac tone is common to the depiction of a land unknown, remote and a vanishing rural life-style. Robinson's poetics can however be linked with the work of contemporary anthropological linguists in his recording, with assistance in translation, of segments from different oral traditions collected in his travels in central Australia and the north and south coasts of New South Wales. Robinson generally seems to have been careful in attributing translated texts to their owners and transmitters, thus avoiding some of the pitfalls of appropriation, as in the following text of the famous Arnhem Land saga "The Two Sisters" as related to him by Manoowa:

> …
> Day and night, and day and night,
> the sisters are gone
> with the morning star and the leaping fish
> and the sky-walking sun.
>
> The sisters, hoar with dried salt spray,
> the semen of the sea,
> make landfall where parrots scream
> from paperbark trees.
>
> The sisters beach the bark canoe,
> Unload the *rannga* things.
> They thrust one in the earth. From there
> The first goanna comes. … (qtd. in Murray, *The New Oxford Book of Australian Verse* 177, original emphasis)

The sensitively untranslated (because probably untranslatable) "*rannga* things" are perhaps best described here, for this audience, as objects of high ceremonial sacredness.

[4] Mudie's *The Australian Dream* was the winning poem of the W. J. Miles Competition for a Patriotic Poem, organized by the Jindyworobak Club in 1943.

In the same spirit the social anthropologists, though not Jindyworobaks, Ronald and Catherine Berndt undertook a comprehensive project in the early 1950s in the recording and translation of traditional sagas from Arnhem Land (e.g. R. Berndt's *Djanggawal* (1952) and R. M. and C. Berndt's *The World of the First Australians* (1964)), as T.G.H. Strehlow did for the Arrernte people in central Australia. Even sensitively rendered recordings and translations by linguistic experts would also invite accusations of appropriation of sensitive and often sacred indigenous material. However, it is difficult to proscribe areas of human experience from the field of the creative imagination, and inevitably, the thematics of the indigenous could not be easily withheld from the evolving palette of settler literature and aesthetics. Berndt's translation of the traditional Wonguri-Mandjikai "Song Cycle of the Moon Bone" would inspire the contemporary poet, Les Murray, to write his own long poem inspired by the traditional form of the Aboriginal Song Cycle.

Murray, born in 1938, the year of the Jindyworobak manifesto, is a highly sophisticated and individual poet who turned to the celebration of rural Australia with which he was strongly connected. Murray described himself as "the last of the Jindyworobaks" (Matthews 11) though he started publishing long after the group had ceased their work. His unstated tribute to the translation and recording work of the Berndts and the spirit of the Jindyworobaks can be seen in his musical, vernacular and rambling celebration of place and time in "The Buladelah-Taree Song Cycle" from which some of the first stanza is cited:

> The people are eating dinner in that country north of Legge's Lake;
> behind flywire and venetians, in the dimmed cool, town people eat Lunch.
> Plying knives and forks with a peek-in sound, with a tuck-in sound
> they are thinking of relatives and inventory, they are talking about customers and visitors.
> In the country of memorial iron, on the creek-facing hills there,
> they are thinking about bean plants, and rings of tank water, of growing a pumpkin by Christmas;
> Rolling a cigarette, they say thoughtfully Yes, and their companion nods, considering.
> Fresh sheets have been spread and tucked tight, childhood rooms have been seen to,
> for this is the season when children return with their children
> To the place of Bingham's Ghost, of the Old Timber Wharf, of the Big Flood That Time
> … (Les Murray, "The Buladelah-Taree Song Cycle," 626)

The poem's homely evocation of a present in the past relies heavily on the repeated use of the present continuous tense, as in the traditional song cycle, and shows a stronger influence of indigenous form than the Jindyworobak verse itself.

**Reception/Representation**

The consensus is that the Jindyworobak movement did not produce literature of any significant or enduring quality in the body of Australian literature, and was at most a temporary aberration reflecting a nationalistic and localist mood of the time. Such hypothesis might be gauged by looking at a sample of Australian poetry anthologies from the 1970s to the present. The 1970 anthology *Modern Australian Poetry*, edited by David Campbell, was not ungenerous, offering four pages of poetry by William Hart-Smith and five pages of work by Roland Robinson. The 1995 *New Oxford Book of Australian Verse*, edited by Les Murray, understandably sympathetic, gave two pages each to William Hart-Smith and Ian Mudie, three to Rex Ingamells and another five to Roland Robinson, all from the latter's transliterations from Aboriginal oral tradition. It also featured James McAuley's "Jindyworobak" poem "Terra Australis"—one of his most anthologized pieces. Perhaps reflecting stronger post-colonial sensitivities about past settler appropriation of indigenous themes no Jindyworobak pieces were collected in Nicholas Jose's 2009 anthology *The Literature of Australia*, other than James McAuley's "Jindyworobak" piece "Terra Australis." However, Jose's anthology was notable for offering a significant representation of literature written by Australia's actual Other, indigenous writers and those of indigenous descent. It includes work by the first published Aboriginal writer David Unaipon whose early work recording indigenous myths had been appropriated, with the complicity of his publisher, by an influential Adelaide physician and amateur anthropologist (Jose 315). The 2011 anthology *Australian Poetry Since 1788* edited by Geoffrey Lehmann and Robert Gray, perhaps more closely allied to the Les Murray line in Australian literature, reverses that trend in relation to settler representation of the Other, with seven pages for William Hart-Smith, and thirteen for both Roland Robinson's poetry and his recording of indigenous oral tradition. The editors describe Robinson as "the Jindyworobaks' most successful poet" (341),[5] while the Jindyworobak's founder Rex Ingamells is not represented. This latest anthology also cites twelve songs from Berndt's translation of the Wonguri-Mandjikai "Song Cycle of the Moon Bone" and also, in full, Les Murray's own borrowing of that indigenous form in his nine page-long "The Buladelah-Taree Song Cycle."

**Writing about the Other**

Post-colonial theorists have written comprehensively on the challenges for fourth world indigenous writers in pursuing an authentic and also wide-reaching literature in the foreign imperial tongue imposed by settler cultures. They have also written about the more relevant challenge to this particular study, how the settler writer can best approach the subject and perspective of the Other. Since the mid-twentieth century there has been growing interest in indigenous themes in Australian literature, notably in the work of Patrick White and Judith Wright, and in a second wave in the nineteen-eighties evident in the fiction of David Malouf and Alex Miller. An evolving field of theory called "whiteness studies" addresses how settler writers might best approach this sensitive area. Critic Margery Fee has offered an interesting argument in her defense of the work of New Zealand novelist Keri Hulme, whose novel *The Bone People*

[5] See also Brian Elliott's *The Jindyworobaks* (lxxx).

had been challenged in connection with questions about her racial authenticity as a Maori. Fee asks: "Can majority group members speak as minority members?" (169). She goes on to answer her question with a hypothesis for an evaluation by scale: "If so, how do we distinguish between biased and oppressive tracts, exploitative popularisations, stereotyped romanticisations, sympathetic identifications and resistant, transformative visions?" (169). In terms of Fee's sliding scale it could be argued that the Jindyworobak poetics, which were certainly not exploitative popularisations like the falsified work of the American writer Marlo Morgan,[6] might be best described as falling somewhere between "stereotyped romanticisations" and "sympathetic identifications" depending on the individual work. Judith Wright judged that "the Jindyworobaks had taught us to know ourselves a little better" (qtd. in Elliott, *The Jindyworobaks*, lxv).

In his novels and poetry David Malouf has written sensitively on the problem, the perceived tragedy of the prospect of loss of language, which faces indigenous and also immigrant communities. While this study does not offer space for addressing his work, I want to draw attention to one strategy he found in a short story "The Only Speaker of his Tongue" (published in 1978) for evoking the trauma of this prospect without trampling on the sensitivities of how to represent or appropriate an Aboriginal language on the verge of extinction, and avoiding sentimentality in so doing. Malouf projects the dilemma of apprehending the threat of language loss through the *persona* of a fictional Norwegian etymologist attempting to gather the disappearing language from his resistant and obstinately untragic subject, an Aboriginal railway worker. The only non-English words inscribed in this very short story are Norwegian, as the etymologist narrator in the full throw of empathy for a fellow minority, before going to sleep at night, recites words from his own tongue, which in his long absence from home are becoming increasingly and alarmingly unfamiliar: "So I say softly as I curl up with the sheet over my head, or stand at the window a moment before this plain that burns even at midnight: *rogn, valnøtt, spiseskje, hakke, vinglass, lysestake, krabbe, kjegle* (Malouf 74).[7] Such empathy is very distinctive of Malouf. His Norwegian's untranslated words are objects of silence, mirrors, oblique strategies for rendering what Margery Fee has described as a "resistant and transformative vision" of the plight of loss of language. They help Malouf step deftly through the post-colonial minefield which is representation of the Other.

**Postscript**

Reflecting again on the term used by Chantal Zabus, the "re-lexification" of endangered indigenous languages, mention should be made of the project of Australian Noongar novelist Kim Scott who employs a scattered use of Noongar language in his novels *Benang* (1999), *That Deadman Dance* (2010) and more recently *Taboo* (2017). In his Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project, Scott has been

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[6] Morgan's 1990 self-published *Mutant Messenger Downunder* originally presented as an autobiographical account of an American woman's inland journey with a tribe, was later admitted to be completely fictitious.

[7] Though Malouf does not translate, these words can be rendered as "egg, walnut, tablespoon, hoe, wineglass, candle stick, crab, cone."

working with tribal elders from the Noongar people of south western Australia, and local schools, to try to rebuild an almost lost language in the place which is his people's home.

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