The J*ournal of the European Association of Studies on Australia*, Vol.2. No.1, 2011, ISSN 2013-6897 under the auspices of *Coolabah* Observatori: Centre d'Estudis Australians, Australian Studies Centre, Universitat de Barcelona

Review

David Callahan

Nathanael O'Reilly, ed. (2010). *Postcolonial Issues in Australian Literature*. Amherst, NY: Cambria Press. Hardcover. Pp. xiv, 317 (including index). ISBN 978-1-60497-711-0. US$114.99.

As the editor of a book with a very similar title, *Contemporary Issues in Australian Literature* (2002), I have an interest in comparing Nathanael O'Reilly's collection and intentions with my own, and the first thing that strikes me is how limiting it turns out to be to use the term "postcolonial" in the study of Australian literature. This is not at all a criticism of the quality of the book, which provides a highly representative and high-quality sample of current thinking about the issues in Australian culture it deals with, as well as readings of those issues in terms of specific literary texts.

To explain what I mean by the limited boundaries of the "postcolonial": on the first page of O'Reilly's Introduction he indicates the range of themes dealt with in the book: "hybridity, first contact, resistance, appropriation, race relations, language usage, indigeneity, immigration/invasion, land rights and ownership, national identity, marginalization, mapping, naming, mimicry, the role of historical narratives, settler guilt and denial, and anxieties regarding belonging" (1-2). Apart from the capacious "national identity", all the other topics are mostly reduceable to the interface between Indigenous Australians and settler-invaders, with a slight concession to the position of presumably non-Anglo-Celtic immigrants.

While on the one hand this is limiting in terms of covering Australian literary activity in general, on the other it does represent current emphases in the study of Australian literature very well, in which the issues O'Reilly enumerates are now at the heart of the definitional impulse within national literary studies. Although this definitional desire can never be satisfied in any absolute sense—Englishness continues to be battled over after all—it remains especially dynamic when the relation between first peoples and others remains so unresolved. If the post-colonial is a reading practice rather than an ontology, as Bill Ashcroft reminds us in an excellent essay in this collection, then in an Australian context it is above all the reading of history and the present (and the future) in terms of the mental, textual and legal adjustments necessary to contest the triumphalist and hierarchising discourses inherited from empire. In no sphere of Australian life is this need more apparent within academic circles than in the interface between Australia's Indigenous peoples and those who wield most of the power within the nation and the state.

In this light, the book constitutes a very good enacting of this need with respect particularly to contemporary literature. After Nicholas Birns's customarily widely focused view concentrating on Jack Lindsay and Patrick White, the rest of the book deals principally with the important fiction of Janette Turner Hospital, Andrew McGahan, Peter Carey, Greg Matthews, Kate Grenville, Kim Scott, Alexis Wright, Melissa Lucashenko, Elizabeth Jolley, and Rodney Hall. Lyn McCredden concludes the volume with a sharp survey of a number of poets from James McAuley to Lisa Bellear, reminding us yet again of how badly served Australian poets are for the most part when compared with fiction writers. Only Bill Ashcroft's "Reading Post-Colonial Australia" and Lesley Hawkes's article on "Spaces of Hybridity" refer much to the nineteenth century, so the post-colonial of the book is generally speaking located in the contemporary.

If the post-colonial is a way of contesting and transforming imperial discourses, however, then it was definitely taking its first steps in the nineteenth century. The trouble for present-day observers is that the transformations then taking place largely marginalised Indigenous peoples, and the varying modulations of nationalising sentiment merge into the nationalist rhetorics of today in ways that make this form of post-colonial assertion problematic. And yet few would deny contemporary continuity with earlier discourses that aimed to redefine Australia's (white, male) identity away from that of its metropolitan centre. My point here is that while all of the essays are useful and relevant to the book's topic, there could perhaps have been a survey essay dealing with current thinking on nineteenth-century resistance to imperial dispensations.

Immediately countering my own argument, it is clear that the long contemporary period is the richest in Australian literature, and certainly the most varied, so it is only right that it should receive the most attention. But even here, it is arguable that the rich vein of migrant and migrant-descendant Australian literature contesting the double "imperial" inheritance from Britain and from the majority Anglo-Celtic cultural flows could have received more attention. Current Asian-Australian literature, or literature by people who resist easy identification, is a case in point, even more so when the principal axis of post-colonial reading concerns the rewriting of the part in the nation of its First Peoples. How is this mediated by writers who feel no cultural continuity between themselves and the history which is being contested? Getting ahead of myself here, I look forward to Maori-Australian writers emerging, from whom might be expected yet other perspectives on Australian identities to dilute the Indigenous/settler-invader binary even more.

In O'Reilly's introduction he claims that the literature of settler countries such as Australia tends to be ignored or excluded in favour of literature from South Asia, Africa or the Caribbean, but while this is certainly as true as he says in North America, it is not true at all in Europe, where settler countries are frequently examined in all of the academic environments where post-colonial studies have taken root. Indeed, there would even be a case for the over-representation of such countries at conferences and in syllabi, given the relative populations of the countries concerned. In books and journals throughout Europe, and in scholarship emanating from Europe, Australia would receive far more attention than any African country with a similar population. At the recent EACLALS conference in Istanbul, the largest regular conference in Europe devoted to

literature from ex-colonial locations, both geographical and mental, a rough count gives 20 papers devoted specifically to Australian issues and 17 to the whole of Africa (excluding South Africa). Post-colonial studies are not necessarily defined by what happens in the United States, an arrogant assumption that O'Reilly contests both in his Introduction as well as in the range of his contributors: Per Henningsgaard, Nicholas Dunlop, Martina Horaková, Rebecca Weaver-Hightower, Michael R. Griffiths, Tomoko Ichitani, Katie Ellis, Sarah Zapata, Peter Mathews, as well as the authors already mentioned. Five are based in the U.S., four in Australia, three in Europe and two in Asia. O'Reilly's larger battle in this context would appear to be with the specific circulation of ideas of difference, the exotic and white guilt that structure this general area in the United States. In this enterprise, to have published this collection of essays there is to have performed a useful service, for the summarising and contemporary nature of the collection is just the sort of thing hard-pressed libraries might acquire, not only in North America but wherever libraries want an up-to-date and high quality assessment of Australian literature in terms of the post-colonial priorities of the present.

David Callahan, Chair of the European Association for Studies on Australia, is Associate Professor at the University of Aveiro, Portugal. Author of *Rainforest Narratives: The Work of Janette Turner Hospital* (UQP, 2009), and Editor of *Australia: Who Cares?* (Australian Public Intellectual Network, 2007) and *Contemporary Issues in Australian Literature* (Frank Cass, 2002). Recent work has dealt with the Australian processing of East Timor in articles such as "History and Shame: East Timor in Australian Fictions", in *Interventions* (2010), and "Consuming and Erasing Portugal in the Lonely Planet Guide to East Timor", in *Postcolonial Studies* (2011).
callahan@ua.pt