



Bookishness and Australian Literature

PATRICK BUCKRIDGE

The terms and tropes associated with books provide essential data for a properly grounded historical phenomenology of reading; at the same time they reflect laterally on some of the broader patterns within the cultures in which they occur. The traditional analogies of "books as friends" and "books as furniture," for example, are nicely succinct epitomes of two very different but equally persistent forms of investment in books— affective and financial investment—which have been deeply characteristic of Anglo-American cultures since the beginning of the nineteenth century.¹ Their embedded familiarity and complexity are, if anything, the more clearly demonstrated by their ironic reversibility: books as the friends you never have to invite over, and books as the intellectual furniture of a well-stocked mind.² Even ostensibly simple and straightforward terms from this same paradigm—a term like "bookish," for example—can turn out, upon closer examination, to be less straightforward and perspicuous than they look.

The word "bookish" has a long history of ambivalence in meaning and connotation: for centuries it was used to designate an individual's praiseworthy commitment to reading and study, and more recently to describe whole cultures that seemed to accommodate and stimulate widespread book-reading. In 1988 George Steiner announced (perhaps prematurely) "the end of bookishness" in this latter sense, at least in the West, the conditions that produced it having been terminally eroded by electronic media.³ But the word has also been used, and within the same time frame, to pillory individuals who prefer books to life, and even to criticise whole phases of cultural life during which books have supposedly acted as a barrier to authentic emotional experience.⁴

I want to suggest that from the late nineteenth century on the idea of "bookishness"—already an increasingly troublesome notion elsewhere in the world—became a small but significant "hot spot" in Australian culture, a kind of fault in the fabric, to change the analogy, that can reveal, under close scrutiny, some of the subtler tensions and contradictions characteristic of a colonial and postcolonial nation engaged in the long and never completed process of national cultural formation.

¹ For the former, see Frederick Denison Maurice, *The Friendship of Books and Other Lectures* (London: Macmillan, 1880), 1–32; for the latter, see Nicholson Baker, "Books as Furniture," in *The Size of Thoughts: Essays and Other Lumber* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996), 195.

² Lyman Abbott, "Foreword," in Alphonso Smith, *What Can Literature Do For Me?* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1921), v–xv.

³ George Steiner, "The End of Bookishness?" *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 July 1988, 754.

⁴ James Edmond, "The Bookish Ghosts of Dr. Huggins," *The Bulletin* [Sydney], 11 December 1920, 1.

Bookishness in *The Bulletin*

In December 1920, James Edmond was allowed (perhaps as a favour to a former editor) to fill three columns of *The Bulletin's* Red Page with a long and whimsical ghost story. The narrator attends the funeral of his former employer, a necromancer of sorts called Dr Huggins, who has progressed from raising the spirits of the dead to materialising the unborn, they being "fresher, less mouldy, less dissipated and more promising than the dead," and finally, his crowning achievement, to bestowing physical forms and temporary personal autonomy on famous literary characters. His specialty is Dickens, and, while David Copperfield, Little Dorrit, Daniel Quilp and others disport themselves sociably and increasingly rowdily in his chambers, they go missing from their textual homes in all extant copies of the novels. The absences are noticed abroad with consternation, and when the characters do return they are often a little the worse for wear, and sometimes return to the wrong novel. In the end they are so emboldened by their experience of freedom and substantiality that they round on their liberator and kill him—hence the funeral.

The title of this rather silly story is "The Bookish Ghosts of Dr Huggins," and it is, I think, capable of being read as a figure for "bookishness" itself, in two of the three separate senses *The Oxford English Dictionary* gives for "bookish."⁵ Strictly speaking, it is the incarnated characters, the ghosts themselves, who are "bookish" in the neutral, and less common, sense of that word, the one invoked by George Steiner: that is, they "belong to books" (*OED*, 1). In one of the more familiar, somewhat derogatory, senses of the word, however (*OED*, 2a: "Addicted to the reading of books; studious"), Huggins himself is "bookish," a condition he enacts metaphorically by conferring substantial reality on what are, and should remain, fictional phenomena. The magical transformations, in other words, can be read as a figure for a foolishly naïve or pathological addiction to books.

The commonest and also the most derogatory sense of bookish, however (*OED*, 2b), is "knowing more about books than about life." This may or may not be present in the Edmond story; but one does not have to look far to find it used in that sense in the pages of *The Bulletin*. Some years later, for example, the Red Page reviewer, presumably Douglas Stewart (the review is unsigned, and Stewart was the editor at the time), used the word several times in his review of *A Time to Laugh*, a volume of essays by Professor F. Sinclair of Canterbury College, University of New Zealand.⁶ The review is entitled "Bookishness," perhaps because Sinclair had applied it to himself. The first two paragraphs of the review, slightly abridged, are as follows:

Professor F. Sinclair describes himself in *A Time to Laugh* as "a bookish person"; and indeed, though the professor is human enough to have had most of his short

⁵ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. J. A. Simpson and E. C. S. Weiner, 2nd ed., 20 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) (hereafter *OED*).

⁶ F. Sinclair, *A Time to Laugh and Other Essays* (Christchurch, NZ: Caxton Press, 1951).

light essays printed in the Christchurch "Press," there is some truth in the description. There is nothing of the urgent vitality of Hazlitt in these essays and, if urgent vitality is not exactly expected at the universities, at least one would have thought some breath of New Zealand air, some green shoot from the New Zealand earth would have found its way in; but except for a few references to the Dominion's need for a national theatre and the like ... *A Time to Laugh* might have been written in a vacuum; or, to put it more justly, in any university in the world.

But then Professor Sinclair does mention Hazlitt; in fact, in the inevitable essay on what books he would take to a desert island, he includes the essayist along with—there are a dozen in the game this time—Shakespeare, Chaucer, Wordsworth, Browning, Boswell's *Johnson*, an omnibus volume of Jane Austen, Virgil, Dante, *Peer Gynt*, and the Bible. . . . and however much a few wild pigs, mountains, earthquakes and so on might help to bring the essays to life, he would be a bold man who would sneeze at "bookishness" of this kind, so formidable in its learning, so easy, graceful, humane and quietly humorous in expression.⁷

There are two interesting things about this passage: one is the way Stewart elaborates the notion of "life" to which bookishness stands opposed, so as to include local realities and national concerns; another is the way his attitude to Sinclair's bookishness oscillates back and forth, so that at some points in the review bookishness connotes bloodlessness, artificiality and deracination, while at other points it connotes civility, wisdom, and urbanity. The Professor is "humane," even if not entirely "human"—but he is "human enough," be it noted, to have written his essays for the local press. For *The Bulletin*, bookishness in Australasia is a deeply ambivalent condition, reflecting—among other things—the full spectrum of political and psychological values ascribed to cosmopolitan high culture by a society still pre-occupied, both critically and affirmatively, with its past and present relationship to the British Empire.

Bookishness and the Canon

A degree of ambivalence has been apparent in the word "bookish" for several centuries: this much is evident in the historical span of citations for all three senses of the word in the *OED*, in each of which there are examples from the late sixteenth century to the late nineteenth. If, in order to achieve a somewhat more substantial sense of this ambivalence than abstract definitions or isolated quotations can provide, one were to compile a list of some of the better-known "bookish" characters in English literature, it might look something like this: Geoffrey Chaucer's Clerk, William Shakespeare's Holofernes and Prospero, Jonathan Swift's Laputans, Samuel Johnson's Imlac, Henry Fielding's Parson Adams, Jane Austen's Mary Bennet, Mr Bennet and Mr Woodhouse, Emily Brontë's Edgar Linton, and George Eliot's

⁷ [Douglas Stewart], "Bookishness," *The Bulletin* [Sydney], 29 August 1951, 1.

Edward Casaubon.⁸ Each of these characters exhibits a disposition somewhere on a continuum from studious application to self-deluding pedantry, and all are presented with some admixture of authorial affection and ridicule. Exceptions may need to be made for the two Victorians last on the list, Edgar Linton and Edward Casaubon, whose bookishness has a tragic dimension that probably bespeaks the birth of a new attitude (to be discussed shortly).⁹

To those variously bookish figures from the English canon, I would add two from the Australian canon: Tom Collins, most obviously—of whom I shall have more to say later—and Sylvia Vickers, whose bookishness Ken Stewart discussed in an essay on *His Natural Life* a few years ago.¹⁰ Stewart shows the complex ways in which Sylvia's ethical and emotional sensibilities are formed by her lifelong intimacy with books. Her idealism and virtue, her civility and courtesy, and also—in certain circumstances—her practical intelligence and resourcefulness, are produced by what Stewart calls her "quaint bookishness," a very precise phrase to describe Sylvia's character and personality (though not one that Clarke himself uses), as it emerges in the famous early scene where she tells Maurice Frere what books she reads and endures his lascivious manhandling.¹¹ Arguably, however, her bookishness also predisposes her to the hysterical amnesia that obliterates her memory of Rufus Dawes's devotion—though Clarke does not make such a connection explicit¹²—as well as making her susceptible, in the end, to an adulterous plan to escape from Frere in company with the Reverend North, thereby betraying Dawes (albeit unwittingly) for a second time.

The serious, sometimes tragic, ambivalence of the bookish disposition in colonial Australian fiction is not a distinctively Australian, or even a distinctively colonial theme; I am suggesting that the colonial environment intensifies and inflects it in

⁸ The works in which these characters appear are, in order, *The Canterbury Tales*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Gulliver's Travels* (Third Voyage), *Rasselas*, *Joseph Andrews*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Middlemarch*.

⁹ Edgar Linton may seem a slightly surprising inclusion, but his attachment to his books—he is reading when Catherine is dying, for example—is undoubtedly a persistent and salient trait, and it is one of his wife's stated reasons for despising him at the end. The ambivalence with which he is regarded in the novel is reflected in the ambivalence of his reputation with readers: notoriously, Charlotte Brontë regarded him as the true hero of *Wuthering Heights* (see her "Preface"). Casaubon is the principal subject of A. D. Nuttall's brilliant study of the changing image of scholars, *Dead from the Waist Down: Scholars and Scholarship in Literature and the Popular Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 26–71.

¹⁰ Ken Stewart, "Sylvia's Books: Literature, Civilisation, and *His Natural Life*," in *And What Books Do You Read?: New Studies in Australian Literature*, ed. Irmtraud Petersson and Martin Duwell (St Lucia, QLD: University of Queensland Press, 1996), 1–14.

¹¹ Marcus Clarke, *For the Term of his Natural Life* (Melbourne: George Robertson, 1885), facsimile edition in Marcus Clarke, *For the Term of his Natural Life, Short Stories, Critical Essays and Journalism*, ed. Michael Wilding (St. Lucia, QLD: University of Queensland Press, 1988), 102–5.

¹² Theories and speculations about the pathological physical and emotional effects of reading on women are discussed in Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader, 1837–1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 47–70.

particular ways; as was noted earlier, however, the theme is already evident in an English fictional character like George Eliot's Mr. Casaubon.¹³ It will therefore be useful to consider what seems to be a new seriousness about the meaning and value of bookishness in many Western societies from about the turn of the nineteenth century.

Romantic Bookishness: Critique and Cult

The most visible aspect of such a shift is the serious and widespread critique of bookishness that was generated by that enthusiastic discovery of folk culture and oral poetry which were so central to German and English Romanticism. A case in point is Wordsworth's insistence, in the preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1802), that a dependence on books had perverted poetic taste and corrupted the language of poetry, and that the true poet needed to become, once again, "a man speaking to men."¹⁴ Thirty-five years later, Ralph Waldo Emerson gave the critique a postcolonial twist in his Harvard address "The American Scholar," in which he warned against bookishness—by which he meant valuing "books as such; not as related to nature and the human constitution, but as making a sort of Third Estate with the world and the soul. Hence the restorers of readings, the emendators, the bibliomaniacs of all degrees."¹⁵ Such misplaced reverence for books—declared the immensely well-read Emerson!—laid the dead hand of the European past on the progressive native impulse that should characterise American scholarship. It also compromised the encounter of the individual soul with God and the world. "I had better never see a book," he said, "than to be warped by its attraction clean out of my own orbit, and made a satellite instead of a system."¹⁶

A few decades further on, in St. Petersburg, we find Fyodor Dostoevsky, recently released from political exile in Siberia, denouncing the bookishness ("knizhnost") of the Radicals of the 1860s in their futile attempts to form a genuine *rapprochement* with the peasantry as part of the project for an authentic and inclusive national cultural identity.¹⁷ Later he would create, in his *Notes from the Underground* (1864), one of the more disturbing embodiments in nineteenth-century European literature of the negative power of bookishness when it embodies itself—as it does in the

¹³ Strictly speaking, Casaubon is "scholarly" rather than bookish, and, while there is clearly a substantial overlap between these two concepts, it must be acknowledged that Casaubon himself is by no means a great reader: as Nuttall points out, his first words in *Middlemarch* are to disclaim any familiarity with modern literature. See Nuttall, 29–30.

¹⁴ William Wordsworth, *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, rev. Ernest De Selincourt (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 737.

¹⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," in *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson in One Volume* (Roslyn, NY: Black's Readers Service Company, n.d.), 558.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Nancy Rutenber, "Bondage and Servitude: Bondage and Self-Invention in Russia and America, 1780–1861," *Slavic Review* 51.4 (Winter 1992): 734–35, 743–47.

"Underground Man"—not in an amusing object of satire but in a figure of malignant hollowness and spiritual inauthenticity.¹⁸

In its various forms—Wordsworthian, Emersonian, Dostoevskian—the nineteenth-century critique of bookishness persisted into the twentieth century. In 1913, a paper entitled "The Blight of Literary Bookishness" was read before the National Council of Teachers of English in Chicago: it began, confrontingly enough, "The book is killing the sensuous beauty and emotional appeal of literature,"¹⁹ and went on to argue vigorously for more recitation and memorisation, and less reading, in the classrooms of America.²⁰

But note the paradox. Over that same long period, from about 1800, in which bookishness is being more seriously demonised than it has ever been before, there is also a shift in the opposite direction, towards a more intense and intimate—at times almost sensuous—love of books: as tactile objects, things of beauty, prized keepsakes, repositories of emotion, catalysts of memory, bonds between friends and lovers, sources of consolation, and much else. This is a love that dares to speak its name, and it does so long and loud for one hundred and fifty years. One of its earliest devotees is William Hazlitt, whose two wonderful essays, one on the pleasures of reading old books, the other on the pleasures—different, but almost as intense—of reading new books, both published in the 1820s, might almost have started the trend, though some of Charles Lamb's essays from the same period, notably his "Detached Thoughts on Books and Reading" and "Old China," create a similar mystique.²¹

Essays about the love of books—"book-love" as it was sometimes called—appeared in considerable numbers in Britain and America all through the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, together with a surprising number of whole books devoted to the subject.²² Such writing usually celebrates the writer's own pleasurable experiences with books: mainly the reading or rereading of them, of course, but often also of browsing, buying, borrowing, handling, and smelling them; sometimes kissing them, as Leigh Hunt approvingly reported of Charles Lamb; and sometimes just sitting surrounded by them and communing with them

¹⁸ Fyodor Dostoevsky, "Notes from the Underground," in *Three Short Novels of Dostoevsky*, trans. Constance Garnett, rev. and ed. Avrahm Yarmolinsky (New York: Doubleday, 1960), 272ff.

¹⁹ Percival Chubb, "The Blight of Literary Bookishness," *The English Journal* 3.1 (January 1914): 15.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 24–26.

²¹ William Hazlitt, "On Reading Old Books," in *Selected Essays of William Hazlitt, 1778–1830*, ed. Geoffrey L. Keynes (London: Random House, 1970); Charles Lamb, *The Essays of Elia, Including the Last Essays of Elia* (London: Dent, 1932).

²² For two very subtle examinations of "bibliomania" and "bibliophilia" in the work of Romantic essayists such as Leigh Hunt, Lamb, Hazlitt and De Quincey, see Ina Ferris, "Bibliographical Romance: Bibliophilia and the Book-Object," in *Romantic Libraries*, ed. Ina Ferris (February 2004) [Romantic Circles Praxis Series. <http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/libraries/intro.html> (accessed 21 August 2007)] and Deidre Lynch, "'Wedded to Books': Bibliomania and the Romantic Essayists," in Ferris [<http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/libraries/lynch/lynch.html> (accessed 21 August 2007)].

as friends and interlocutors. This kind of writing shades off at the edges into formal literary criticism, autobiography, and practical reading-advice and guidance; but it occupies a substantial space of its own which can reasonably be characterised as "bookish"—and bookish in a *sense* which is materially very close to that invoked by Emerson or Wordsworth, but accompanied by an *attitude* towards it that could hardly be more distant from theirs. What they and their successors regarded as disabling to imaginative freedom, emotional spontaneity and creative individuality, Hazlitt, Lamb, Hunt and *their* successors regarded as—if not enabling those things precisely—offering experiences just as intense, lasting, and significant.

It would be natural to interpret this cult of "book-love" as somehow expressing the personalities and circumstances of "bookish" individuals like Jane Austen's Mr. Woodhouse—meek, somewhat peevish people who just want to be left alone in their libraries. But Hazlitt, Leigh Hunt, and others who published books and essays on this theme tended, on the contrary, to be radical political activists, a fact which suggests that these public professions of private "book-love" should be understood not so much as the voice of a comfortably existing cultural ethos, seeking its reassuring echo from the like-minded and similarly endowed (or even, *pace* Deidre Lynch, as individual appropriations of the literary heritage),²³ but rather as political acts, intended—in the democratic spirit of the Reform Bills—to enrich and energise ordinary, uncultivated lives by disseminating an awareness of new pleasurable possibilities in reading, and by evoking and modelling a "book-loving" disposition that was available, in principle, to anyone in society who wished to inhabit it.

Whatever the merits of this way of regarding the nineteenth-century book-love cult in general, it was certainly taken up with a missionary zeal by the pioneers of working-class education in Britain, such as F. D. Maurice, many of whose lectures—like the one entitled "The Friendship of Books" (1856)—were on precisely this theme; and also, later in the century, by the founders of the University Extension Movement in both Britain and the United States, men like R. G. Moulton and W. H. Hudson (both of whom had transatlantic teaching careers). Hudson, memorable to Australians of a certain age as the author of the oft-reprinted *Outline History of English Literature* (1910), wrote several books evoking and promoting "book-love" as a way of life: titles like *Idle Hours in a Library* (1897), *A Quiet Corner in a Library* (1915), and *On the Friendship of Books* (1923) give the flavour. It is even clearer with these works than with the essays mentioned above that the target reader was not the like-minded book lover, but rather extension students—working men and women who, even if their work-ethic, sense of duty, or initial enthusiasm made them conscientious readers, were in many cases unlikely to be fully "appreciative" readers without being inducted into an expectation of enjoyment as well as profit, receiving a foretaste of the intrinsic literary pleasures awaiting them, and—most important of all—acquiring a sense of being "at home" with books.²⁴

²³ Lynch, "Wedded to Books: Bibliomania and the Romantic Essayists," pars. 3–5.

²⁴ W. H. Hudson tries to draw a conceptual distinction between book-love and bookishness. "It is

The Extension Movement, then—broadly defined—was a sphere in which a positive notion of bookishness (“book-love”) was deliberately foregrounded for what might be called “affectively propaedeutic” purposes: that is, for preparing students to get the most out of books, less by advising them how to read books, or what books to read, than by showing them how to feel “at home” with literary book-culture.

Reading Old Books in a New Country

What is the relevance of all this to an understanding of Australian bookishness? Firstly, it can provide a fresh perspective on the activities of some of the individuals and institutions that devoted themselves to the dissemination and appreciation of literature in Australia in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. It is a truism of our cultural history that there has been a sporadic anxiety about Australia’s literary relationship with the Old World; and this anxiety has been described in different ways—psychological, existential, political—and was no doubt experienced in various forms at different times, perhaps even at the same times.

The anxiety which is of interest to us here is the quite specific, rational and practical kind of anxiety felt by many teachers, academics, journalists, editors and writers who worried (not altogether unreasonably) that Australians were at serious risk—through distance, lack of interest, and a different physical environment, to say nothing of uncongenial cultural values and social circumstances—of losing their affective and imaginative access to the literature of the Old World.

Many educational and publishing projects were designed at least partly to address this problem and to lessen the risk. The first necessity for all such projects was having the right books available, often enough a challenge in itself; but more needed to be done—so it was felt—to mediate the books effectively to increasingly remote readerships, whether children or adults. To take just one example, Professor J. J. Stabile of the University of Queensland, in his “Preface” to a popular interwar poetry anthology for schools, *The Bond of Poetry* (1924), drew attention to the special strategies of selection and sequencing he had used to maintain that emotional and imaginative access to the English canon across the widening gap between British and Australian life-experiences.²⁵

The Australian population as a whole was thought by many Australian literary intellectuals to be in need of just that kind of assistance, and for similar reasons: like

sometimes urged against the love of reading that it tends to foster a ‘bookish’ habit of mind. We come, it is alleged, to depend too much upon literature and too little upon ourselves.” “But,” he concludes, “this is only when our books are wrongly used. When they are rightly used there is no such danger; and we use them rightly when we treat them not as autocrats, or pontiffs, or dictators, but simply as friends.” See W. H. Hudson, *On The Friendship of Books* (London: Harrap, 1923), 60–61.

²⁵ For a discussion of Stabile’s anthology, see Patrick Buckridge, “The Age of Appreciation: Reading and Teaching Classic Literature in Australia in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Australian Literary Studies* 22.3 (2006): 353.

Stable's postulated schoolchildren, they needed help in bridging the colonial gap; or again, like F. D. Maurice's British workingmen, and W. H. Hudson's London extension students, Australians needed an "affective propaedeutic" to infect them with book-love and recruit them to book-lore.

Institutions such as literary societies no doubt played their part in these endeavours, particularly during the twenty years on either side of the turn of the century, though there were wide variations in the bookishness of their remits, which is to say their commitment to promoting a "book-loving" ambience rather than more specialised, professional, practical or educational goals. Given the privacy of most leisure reading, however, magazines, newspapers and books—together with small libraries and bookshops—may well have been more successful instruments of bookish intervention than clubs and societies, where public attestations of one kind or another were often expected of members.²⁶

An early twentieth-century example of such a publication was the aptly named magazine, *The Book Lover*, an eight-page monthly review edited and largely written by Henry Hyde Champion, an upper-class English socialist who emigrated to Melbourne and established the Book Lovers' Library, in partnership first with Isabella Goldstein and later with her daughter Elsie (younger sister of the more famous Vida), who became his wife. The Library stayed in business for over thirty years, lending and selling a wide range of "good literature," and in 1899 Champion began to publish *The Book Lover*, which lasted for twenty years, as the vehicle of a distinctly bookish cultural space in which the reviews themselves seemed almost incidental to the chatty, sophisticated, and knowing ambience it created for its readers. John Barnes, his biographer, writes that "Champion presented himself as the urbane, cultivated reader, with a wide acquaintance among the literati and public men, discreetly reminiscing about his somewhat turbulent past while intelligently commenting on a selection of the latest books and keeping his readers up to date with what was happening on the English scene."²⁷

The most efficient instrument of all, however, for creating bookish spaces and administering them to whole populations was the daily newspaper; and the *virtuoso* of that instrument in Australia for most of the first half of the twentieth century was Walter Murdoch, whose widely syndicated literary leaders, essays and columns evoked the pleasures of reading and reflecting on books for three generations of Australians. Not all Murdoch's essays are about books, but a great many of them are, and many of those that are not contain bits and pieces of book-lore and occasional literary references that somehow manage to include rather than exclude the less

²⁶ On the role of literary societies, libraries and bookshops in the period 1891–1945, see several chapters in Martyn Lyons and John Arnold, eds., *A History of the Book in Australia 1891–1945: A National Culture in a Colonised Market* (St. Lucia, QLD: University of Queensland Press, 2001), especially chaps. 8–12 and 20–24.

²⁷ John Barnes, "H. H. Champion and the *Book Lover*," in *A History of the Book in Australia 1891–1945*, 144–45.

well-read reader.²⁸ Other public figures—many of them, like Murdoch, university professors—while clearly aiming for a similar effect, do not always manage the tone quite so successfully.²⁹ In Brisbane, J. Scott MacDonald, English master at Brisbane Boys' College, wrote Saturday "literary leaders" for the *Courier* (after 1933 the *Courier-Mail*) for the whole of the interwar period. An elegant, witty and learned writer, he places himself very consciously and allusively in the tradition of Lamb and Hazlitt, and his focus is even more intensely bookish than Murdoch's; his topics include bedside books, book-borrowing, bookworms, marginalia, letters, diaries, autobiographies, dictionaries and "book-mortality," as well as appreciative essays on particular classic writers.³⁰

A serious and ongoing issue of cultural history begins to emerge here, that of the *portability* of reading practices. In these days of cosmopolitan mobility we are accustomed to recognising and affirming contemporary migrations of literature across spatial, social and cultural boundaries. We seek out and celebrate historical instances of the transformative passage of past texts and traditions into new social and geographic contexts. Stories about popular reinterpretations of Shakespeare notwithstanding, however, bravura feats of "creative misreading" have nearly always been the province of writers and theatre-directors rather than ordinary readers in the new, usually colonial or postcolonial, contexts to which the texts travel. Ordinary readers in those contexts read old books less adventurously perhaps, but probably with more personal engagement and understanding, when parts of the old contexts could be made to travel along with them, not just in memory or imagination, but also in the familiar material and social environments of book-reading itself, as reproduced with more or less fidelity or literality in the new country.

A wealth of documentation exists to show that, alongside genuinely innovative initiatives like the Bush Book Club,³¹ efforts were indeed continually being made by Australians to reproduce the contexts and conditions of Old World book-reading in the new environment.³² Recent work on the effects of situational norms on human behaviour perhaps throws some light on the wisdom of such efforts. Cordelia Fine cites recent empirical research by two Dutch psychologists indicating that, among other instances of context-influenced behaviour, individuals who were exposed to images of a library immediately "tuned [their] behaviour to suit a quiet, bookish setting";³³ and there is every reason to suppose that for a majority of Australians, at

²⁸ For a discussion of Murdoch's views on reading, see Patrick Buckridge, "'Serious Reading' Between the Wars," in *A History of the Book in Australia 1891-1945*, 330.

²⁹ Buckridge, "The Age of Appreciation," 353-55.

³⁰ J. Scott MacDonald, *A Bookman's Essays* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1928).

³¹ Martyn Lyons, "The Bush Book Club of New South Wales," in *A History of the Book in Australia 1891-1945*, 204-9.

³² Martyn Lyons, "Reading Practices in Australia," in *A History of the Book in Australia 1891-1945*, 336-53; Elizabeth Webby, "Not Reading the Nation: Australian Readers of the 1890s," *Australian Literary Studies* 22.3 (2006): 308-18.

³³ See Cordelia Fine, "All in the Back of Your Mind: So Much of Our Behaviour is Governed by

least until the middle of the twentieth century, the activity of reading was similarly supported and facilitated by the traditionally “bookish” settings—whether private or institutional—in which it took place.

On this view, the intuitions of Maurice and Hudson in Britain, and of Stable, Champion, Murdoch and MacDonald in Australia, about the external conditions needed for “good reading” to occur are all tantamount to a recognition—with reference to the readership each of them had in mind—of the force of a startlingly simple proposition: that in the main people read books with more pleasure and understanding in material and mental spaces which are “reading-friendly”—which is to say congenially and conducively *bookish*.

Implicit in the preceding three paragraphs is a slippage between two kinds of reading-context: a bookish or “book-loving” context of assumed values and material circumstances; and the originary (usually British) context in which many of the classic works being read by Australians were written, and to which those works constantly refer. In reality such a slippage does exist, but it exists not so much within the terms of the present discussion as within Australian culture itself, where questions of cultural deficiency and colonial inferiority have often been thoroughly intertwined and confused. In a sense, the absence of bookish contexts became for a time a defining feature of Australian literary nationalism. Thus, for example, one has only to revisit Professor George Cowling’s notorious observations in *The Age* in 1935—the ones about the problematic absence of ancient ruins in Australia that so scandalised P. R. Stephensen in his *Foundations of Culture in Australia* later that same year—to see that, however offensive the Professor’s reflections on the prospects for an indigenous Australian literature may have seemed to a cultural nationalist like Stephensen, the unfortunate Cowling was really only making the same point that his counterpart in Queensland, J. J. Stable (an Australian by birth), had made a decade earlier, namely, that full and fruitful access to the classical literary traditions of Britain and Europe was rendered difficult for Australians by distance and difference.³⁴ And indeed, as Leigh Dale has pointed out, it was Miles Franklin rather than Stephensen who engaged seriously with Cowling on that issue.³⁵

Just as Murdoch, Champion, Cowling and others enacted the over-determination of Romantic book-love by their felt need for an enabling bookishness, so “Inky” Stephensen and other literary nationalists enacted an over-determination of the Romantic critique of bookishness by a nationalist hostility to British cultural and intellectual pretension. Set against the enticements of an invitingly pleasurable

Subliminal Stimuli,” *The Australian Higher Education Supplement*, 17 January 2007; H. Aarts and A. Dijksterhuis, “The Silence of the Library: Environment, Situational Norm and Social Behavior,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 84.1 (2003): 18–28.

³⁴ P. R. Stephensen, “The Foundations of Culture in Australia” (1935), in John Barnes, ed., *The Writer in Australia 1856–1964* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1966), 209–10.

³⁵ Leigh Dale, *The English Men: Professing Literature in Australian Universities* (Canberra: Association for the Study of Australian Literature, 1997), 153.

bookishness, therefore, was the powerful rhetoric of the "National Type," especially in the version developed and disseminated by *The Bulletin* and its progeny since its inception in the 1880s. The Type is characterised as much by his disdain for books and bookish people as by any of his other legendary attributes; and in any case several of the other attributes—the anti-authoritarianism, the anti-imperialism, the improvisational flair, even the egalitarianism—could be regarded as concomitants or consequences of a notionally book-deprived life in the bush.³⁶

Bookishness and Australian Fiction: Spence, Franklin, Furphy

The rhetorical force of the discourse of a "bookless bush" is attested in many different ways, not least by the determination of successive generations of social historians to contest or qualify the accuracy of its representations of actual colonial reading habits.³⁷ It is somewhat counter-balanced in the nineteenth century by fictional representations of female book-lovers leading actively bookish lives in the colonies. An early example is *Clara Morison* (1854) by Catherine Helen Spence, in which the importance to a civilised society, not just of reading books, but of discussing them earnestly and at length, is dramatised in a series of highly sophisticated literary conversations. The half-dozen interlocutors—Clara herself, a young Scottish immigrant "of good family," compelled by accidental misfortune to enter service in Adelaide, a male acquaintance of her employer, and several female guests and neighbours—are finely differentiated across a range of reading tastes and competences. At the same time, key shifts and developments in the story are actually mediated by the interplay of the characters' own opinions about books with their assumptions about one another's literary preferences.³⁸

The bookish world constructed in Spence's novel, though hemmed in on all sides by philistinism and greed, seems to possess a confident solidity and self-sufficiency, even a certain obliviousness to the various internal and external threats to its autonomy. The bookish world constructed nearly half a century later by the young Miles Franklin in *My Brilliant Career* (1901) is considerably more solipsistic, precarious and powerless. Sybylla Melvyn's love of books, her opinions on Byron, Thackeray, Dickens and Longfellow, for example—not to mention Gordon, Ken-

³⁶ For a summary of the legendary attributes, see Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1958), 1-2.

³⁷ George Nadel, *Australia's Colonial Culture: Ideas, Men and Institutions in Mid-Nineteenth Century Eastern Australia* (Melbourne: F. W. Cheshire, 1957), 75-110; Beverley Kingston, *The Oxford History of Australia. Volume 3, 1860-1890. Glad, Confident Morning* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1988), 211ff.; John Hirst, *Sense and Nonsense in Australian History* (Melbourne: Black Inc. Agenda, 2005), 56-79; Alan Atkinson, *The Europeans in Australia: A History*, vol. 1 (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1997), ix-xviii.

³⁸ Catherine Helen Spence, *Clara Morison: A Tale of South Australia During the Gold Fever*. A facsimile of the first edition [1854], with an Introduction by Susan Magarey (Kent Town, SA: Wakefield Press, 1994), 33ff., 42ff., 55ff., 101, 122ff., 126, 138ff., 147ff., 205ff.

dall, Lawson and Paterson³⁹—are shared with no one (except the reader, whose views, if they differ from hers, are not sought!). The M'swat children cannot be taught to love books, and their parents cannot see the point of trying to make them. Even Caddagat, her grandmother's home, and a feminine Eden of sorts, can provide nothing much in the way of a bookish context beyond a small library and a somewhat *distracte* Aunt Helen. Crucially, Sybylla's own belief in the value of a bookish culture—the only one in which she feels she has a place—is diminished by her years of proximity to its opposite, a world in which almost everyone finds her reading (let alone her writing) a puzzling and unprofitable occupation at best. In the end (and thus also at the narrative outset) the narrator's self-mocking attitude to her own bookishness can be read as a kind of pre-emptive surrender to the anti-bookishness of bush nationalism.⁴⁰

Joseph Furphy's "Tom Collins" is, by any odds, the most ostentatiously bookish character in Australian literature: his consciousness and language are saturated to bursting-point with Classical, Biblical, British and American literature.⁴¹ But he is also an admirer, and to some extent himself an embodiment, of the legendary—and resolutely anti-bookish—Australian bushman. This paradox is hinted at in the first chapter of *Such Is Life* (1903), where Tom—prompted by the ludicrous spectacle of Willoughby, the reduced English gentleman—reflects contemptuously on the habit of Australian novelists "who [find] no inconsistency in placing the bookish student, or the city dandy, many degrees above the bushman, or the digger, or the pioneer, in vocations which have been the life-work of the latter."⁴² The satiric bite is sustained here by restricting the negative force of "bookish" to a lack of the "many-sided efficiency" to be found in the practical and versatile bushman, while protecting "book-learning" as such from collateral fire by insisting on its proper independence from "gentility." And speaking of bites, Furphy's only other use of the word itself in *Such Is Life* occurs at the point where a beleaguered Tom, witnessing a canine reprise of Saltbush Bill's unorthodox victory over the English jackaroo, depreciates the "mere bookish theories" of a hostile farm dog—its hidebound tactics of worrying, freezing and chawing—as against the more flexible and successful "snapping system" favoured by his dog, Pup.⁴³

But there is also a deeper, less resolved, irony present in the fact that Collins is in reality just as bookish as Willoughby. He and his group of interlocutors, in

³⁹ Miles Franklin, *My Brilliant Career* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2001), 61.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 2–3, 258.

⁴¹ A considerable debt is owed to John Barnes, Frances Devlin Glass and Bob White, among others, for showing the extent of Tom's erudition. See John Barnes, *The Order of Things: A Life of Joseph Furphy* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press Australia, 1990), 13–135; Joseph Furphy, *The Annotated Such Is Life*, ed. Frances Devlin Glass, Robin Eaden, G. W. Turner, Lois Hoffman (Sydney: Halstead Classics, 1991); R. S. White, *Furphy's Shakespeare* (Nedlands, WA: Centre for the Study of Australian Literature, 1989).

⁴² Furphy, *Such Is Life*, 32.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 104.

both *Such Is Life* and *Rigby's Romance* (1905–6), constitute a kind of Utopian cultural fantasy: a “bookishness without books,” which is to say culture without a conducive context, an improbable but imaginable fusion of literary and intellectual sophistication with the laconic, down-to-earth practicality of the legendary bushman. It gives Collins (and Furphy) a vantage point from which to “disturb the congested ignorance of the bookish public” without surrendering his own bookish prerogatives.⁴⁴

Furphy is thus using the concept of “bookishness” as a way of thinking his way into (if not out of) the dilemma faced by a progressive nationalist intellectual on the periphery of an empire whose political overlordship he resents, whose class system he despises, but with whose cultural and intellectual traditions he neither wants, nor can afford, to lose his intimate and continuing contact.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis of what I have mainly referred to as “bookishness” probably invites comparison with the kind of analysis to be found in that well-thumbed mainstay of early Cultural Studies, Raymond Williams’s *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976). And there is indeed some evidence, especially in earlier periods, of a wide range of meanings and connotations in the word “bookish,” such as might serve to underpin a discussion along the lines of Williams’s classic entries on “Culture” or “Realism.” In reality, though, the pejorative sense of “bookish” becomes heavily dominant from the early nineteenth century—with isolated, perhaps archaising, recent exceptions like the George Steiner essay quoted at the beginning of this article—and the object of attention, accordingly, has been not so much the word itself as the conceptual space it occupies, in company with other, more positively-marked terms, such as “book-love” and its cognates.

Viewed in those terms, “bookishness” flags a persistent and interesting problem in Australian cultural history, which might be abstractly summarised as a deep ambivalence about the value and necessity of conducive reading-contexts. I have tried to suggest why and whence that ambivalence arises and to offer some brief examples of how it plays out in some classic Australian fiction. Clearly there is much more that could be said from the literary historical viewpoint; but it is worth adding, by way of conclusion, that even though, for various reasons, the question ceased to be an especially prominent literary theme after the Second World War, it remained—and indeed it still remains—an unsolved problem of “English” curriculum and pedagogy in Australian schools and universities.

Griffith University, Nathan, Queensland

⁴⁴ Joseph Furphy, *Rigby's Romance* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1970), xix.