Teaching Australian Literature

From classroom conversations to national imaginings
AATE Interface Series
Series Editor: Cal Durrant

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Teaching Australian Literature
From classroom conversations to national imaginings

Edited by
Brenton Doecke, Larissa McLean Davies and Philip Mead
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The Floating Library

Cal Durrant

My education in Australian literature began just as it did for many of my generation – lined up every Monday morning on the primary school quadrangle reciting a poem or singing a song as the Australian flag was raised. Not that we knew – or cared – whether the recitations or singing were ‘Australian’ or anything to do with ‘Empire’; we just liked the rhythms, the rhymes or the tunes, and once learned, quickly parodied.

I have no recollection of being taught anything distinctively literary – never mind Australian – during my primary school years, though clearly I must have, as I recognised some of the poetry and short stories we visited later in junior high school English classes, including Paterson’s ‘Mulga Bill’s Bicycle’ and Lawson’s ‘The Loaded Dog’, though these may well have drifted into my consciousness via *The School Magazine* or school radio broadcasts over the ABC. To my knowledge, our suburban primary school didn’t even have a library.

But there were no hints of a class novel, not even one read episodically by our teacher over the course of a school term. I do recall studying Neville Shute’s *Pied Piper* in either Year 8 or 9, but because of the setting and the nature of the hero, never connected the author with being ‘one of us’ (he emigrated to Australia from England in 1950); I didn’t even make the connection with him on my adult exposure to *On the Beach*, which was set in and around Melbourne and the highly acclaimed *A Town Like Alice*. In about the same year, we must also have studied Colin Thiele’s *Sun on the Stubble*. I found it at once both strangely nostalgic (my father’s stories of growing up in South Australia) and hilarious, and I distinctly remember my despondency when I finished reading the last page; I wanted the adventures of Bruno to go on forever.

We have recently relocated from Perth to Sydney, renting an old waterfront house on Scotland Island in Pittwater, about 30 kilometres north-east of the CBD. Not long after moving to the island, I read Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* and its highly evocative descriptions of early life on the Hawkesbury River, which joins ‘our’ Pittwater at its mouth. I was struck by some of the
recognisable characteristics still to be found amongst what are known around Pittwater as the ‘offshore communities’. Considering how close we are to Sydney, the sense of community that exists here is quite remarkable. One could still be in a 1950s – or even 1850s – rural setting where life revolves around one’s neighbours, a sort of social and economic co-dependency in its most positive sense.

Near Cargo Wharf, you can look across to Rocky Point that backs onto Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park overlooking the picturesque inlet known as Lovett Bay. There, sitting high on the hill amongst the sentinels of spotted gums and ironbarks, is an impressive looking yellow house called Tarrangaua. *Tarrangaua* was designed by the controversial Sydney architect Hardy Wilson and built around 1925 for the poet Dorothea Mackellar, she of the ‘sunburnt country’ fame that we so irreverently parodied in primary school.

Mackellar’s home was a summer retreat and the offshore communities are still like that today. Despite the jousting with traffic for an hour-and-a-half coming home from the city, the moment you park your car and step onto the ferry or into your boat, it is like going on vacation. Stress rushes from your being like the bubbles from your propeller. There is something about retreating across water that is both actual and symbolic. Her well known lines about a ‘sunburnt country’ and being ‘sick at heart’ when all around us ‘we see the cattle die’ is a very different landscape from the one she knew at Lovett Bay. While it clearly resonates with those Australians who ‘know’ or have seen the outback, it doesn’t match the offshore *mise-en-scene* she came to love in Pittwater. I tend to agree with Susan Duncan that another poem she published in 1926, ‘Peaceful Voices’, is much more likely to be representative of what she grew to appreciate about living at Tarrangaua, particularly the lines of the final stanza:

>I happy, in a leafy fortress  
>Listen to hidden birds  
>And small waves of a making tide  
>Mingling their lovely words

(Quoted in Duncan, 2008, p. 41)

Duncan tells some wonderful stories of Mackellar’s time on Pittwater and of the urban myths surrounding her life there. She would swim out to her twelve-metre wooden motor launch where she would remain in seclusion all day. Why? The moored vessel was her own floating library, stacked with
her beloved books. Not until it was too dark to read would she swim back to shore again (Duncan, 2008, p. 46).

My single regret about my primary schooling is that I never had a teacher with the sensitivity, knowledge or understanding of what it was he/she might have done to enable a seven-year-old boy to develop some insight into what he parroted most Monday mornings. Why this omission? I look at the student teachers I have helped transform over the almost thirty years I have been in higher education and shudder to think of the limited exposure they have had to literature in general and Australian literature in particular. We can blame state and federal educational authorities for crowding the curriculum and for limiting the time and space available to read about what their fellow citizens have to say or have said in the past. But is that reason enough?

It is with a sense of satisfaction as well as optimism, then, that AATE Council – through our partnership with Wakefield Press – presents Teaching Australian Literature as its AATE Interface Series publication for 2011. I would like to thank Brenton, Larissa and Philip for their splendid vision of a book of this nature; in my opinion, something that is sorely needed to assist secondary English teachers in particular, but also primary teachers who are responsible for first giving kids a taste of what an engagement with a literature of their own can mean.

Hopefully, through reading and thinking about this book, teachers can help inspire a new generation of Australian students to let their imaginations swim towards that ‘Floating Library’ of Australian literature, just as Dorothea Mackellar did all those years ago at Tarrangaua.

Cal Durrant
AATE Interface Series Editor
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Reference
On August 21, 2011 the Melbourne *Age* reported that the University of Melbourne wasn’t offering any formal undergraduate studies in Australian literature. In ‘Uni brought to book for snub to local literature,’ journalist Nicole Brady reported on a ‘DIY’ course in Australian literature organised by third-year Arts student Stephanie Guest in response to the absence of official undergraduate offerings in 2011. Guest’s student-run seminar series took place in Melbourne’s historic Law quad on Friday afternoons, and hosted a number of writers, including Elliot Pearlman, who all came along to talk about their craft. Apparently, Guest became aware of an enthusiasm for and commitment to a national literature while on an exchange to Argentina, as a student of Spanish. This caused her to reflect on her own sparse knowledge of Australian literature, mostly gained at high school through the study of ‘very dusty’ texts about mateship, world wars and white men. Inspired by the ways literature in Spanish provides insights into the nuances of Argentinean culture, Guest keenly felt the absence of her national literary cultural capital, and resolved to remedy this situation when she returned to Australia. Disappointed, but not unfazed when she found that no formal course was available to her, Guest sought out like-minded peers, and set about contacting local writers.

It is ironic but not uncommon that it took Guest to leave Australian shores to return imaginatively to ideas of nation and identity. While she had reluctantly studied Australian literature at high school, she found herself wanting to recover and claim her own national literary inheritance when she was
living in a country where nation and nationalism were celebrated. Australian literature became a talisman and an entitlement for her. In a subsequent interview with Ramona Koval on the Radio National program, ‘The Book Show’ (25 August, 2011), Guest revealed that she had been reading Miles Franklin’s My Brilliant Career, and couldn’t believe that no one had previously introduced her to this classic work. Yet there are assumptions behind these exchanges that are worth reflecting on. The implication appears to be that all those who have been responsible for Guest’s literary education have unequivocally failed her, but this belies the complexity of selecting and teaching Australian literature in contemporary Australian society, and accepts without question the notion that Australian literature should be taught for a nationalising, civic purpose. Further, Brady’s article and Koval’s program reinforce the idea that national literature, despite its diversity, somehow provides access to a homogeneous aesthetic, an antipodean imaginary. It was the desire to respond to notions such as these, as they had been represented in recent times in a five-year long media and governmental discourse, that prompted us to embark on Teaching Australian Literature: from classroom conversations to national imaginings.

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It is worth acknowledging at this point that the themes of inheritance, canon, and cultural capital that underlie Brady’s article and Koval’s radio program can be found in debates about Australian literature that have existed in public, media and institutional discourse since the first part of the twentieth century. Indeed, one provenance of these exchanges lies back in the 1930s, when P.R. Stephensen defended the study of Australian literature in his treatise The Foundations of Culture in Australia (1936) and in the Publicist, where the merits of the study of Australian literature was the subject of robust discussion. What was at stake was the significance of a national identity and sense of ‘belonging’ vis-à-vis the social upheaval of the Great Depression. This theme was taken up in various ways by writers and social commentators at that time—W.K. Hancock, for example, in his influential history, Australia (1930), advocated a much more consensual approach towards the question of national identity than Stephensen’s militant advocacy of ‘Australianness’ (Doecke, 1993, 1998). It is curious that at a time when Australia is similarly exposed to world-wide economic developments, most notably the uncertainties and effects of the global financial system, that people are once again engaging in debate about the role that Australian literature might play in promoting a sense of national identity.
On one level, Nicole Brady’s article in the *Age* ironically echoes something of the circumstances of the earlier articulations of these debates. When P.R. Stephensen launched his defence of Australian literature, it was in response in part to remarks made by the then Professor of English at the University of Melbourne, G.H. Cowling, also in the *Age* (16 February, 1935) who had asserted that ‘good Australian novels which are entirely Australian are bound to be few … Australian life is too lacking in tradition, and too confused, to make many first-class novels’. Cowling had argued further that “Literary culture is not indigenous, like the gum tree, but is from a European source” (Cowling, quoted in Stephensen, 1936). In this context, Stephensen’s assertions about the validity and significance of Australian literature were designed to shame Cowling, and to present his views as outmoded and a possible catalyst for change. Stephensen writes prophetically and hopefully that Cowling’s attitudes will become a thing of the past:

Some day there will be learned Professors to write text-books on the developments of literature in Australia during the nineteen-twenties and nineteen-thirties … They will find Cowling’s article and quote it to show some of the difficulties which literature in Australia had to contend against at that time – the discouragements, the gratuitous insults of the learned, the unteachability of the already-too-well-taught. They may go on to record that, as a result of Professor Cowling’s demonstration of hostility towards Australian culture, a Chair of Australian Literature was ultimately endowed at Melbourne University and at six other Australian Universities (including Canberra), to supplement the traditional teaching in English, French, German, and other European literatures; and that thus Professor Cowling’s excursus into journalism indirectly helped to establish Australian literature in a way which he did not intend. (Stephensen, 1935, p. 22)

Brady’s newspaper article shows that Stephensen’s prophecy has not, by 2011, entirely come to pass. Most universities still do not have Chairs in Australian literature. Yet, when compared with Stephensen’s ‘Essay towards national self-respect’, Brady’s article also highlights the ways in which the debate has shifted in recent times, reflecting changes in the public sphere and the institutional settings where that debate is played out.

Despite what Brady infers, the study of Australian literature no longer needs to be justified in terms of the aesthetic value of Australian creative
writing, as it did in Stephensen’s day. Brady’s article reports on a hiatus in the
teaching of Australian literature at the University of Melbourne, rather than a
reluctance to explore what she describes as ‘local’ texts. It is also noteworthy
that since Stephensen wrote his manifesto, universities and schools have
incorporated Australian literature in various ways across the curriculum, in
addition to being a component of English and literary studies subjects. This
has happened predominantly from the 1970s. Philip Mead, Kerry Kilner and
Alice Healy’s ALTC report on the Teaching Australian Literature Survey (2010)
in senior secondary and first-year university contexts shows that Australian
literature is taught in a range of ways, and is present in cross-disciplinary
contexts in both schools and universities.

Yet, although there is much evidence that the teaching of Australian
literature is a significant presence in the university curricula, is widely taught
in secondary schools and is even mandated in some secondary curricula,
articles like Brady’s that point to a crisis in the teaching of Australian literature
have become increasingly prevalent in this new century.¹ This revived
concern about the status of the teaching of Australian literature began with
Rosemary Neill’s article ‘Lost for Words’ in the Australian at the end of 2007.
Neill’s article expressed alarm at the declining number of senior university
positions in Australian literature and the apparent lack of postgraduate interest
in projects concerning national texts. While Neil was mostly concerned about
Australian literature in the tertiary sector, the articles that followed in the
state and national newspapers looked for causes of this situation, and in doing
so typically directed attention to the work of English teachers in secondary
schools. Ultimately, and as is argued in this book (see Mead, and Parr and
Bellis) and elsewhere (see McLean Davies 2008), this resulted in The Australia
Council for the Arts recommending that the teaching of Australian literature
be reviewed, and a more traditional pedagogical approach to the teaching of
national texts be adopted. At a time when the first iteration of the national
curriculum was being proposed, this debate had a significant impact on the
initial and subsequent renditions of the curriculum documents (see McLean
Davies 2010).

The notion of secondary teachers and the secondary curriculum being
responsible for, or at least contributing to, the ‘crisis’ in the study of Australian
literature also hovers, as we have suggested, around Brady’s article. Guest
was only exposed to ‘dusty’ texts and themes at school in the small sample
of Australian literature she encountered, and this apparently dampened any
interest in Australian literature she might have had. Seeking to establish, it appears, who was to blame for Guest’s initial lack of knowledge and interest in Australian literature, and to explore the contribution of secondary schools to this ‘crisis’, Ramona Koval asked guest Bernadette Brennan, President of ASAL (the Association for the Study of Australian Literature) and Senior Lecturer in Australian Literature at Sydney University: “What is the answer to this [problem]? Is it something about how Australian students are exposed to Australian writing during high school?” Ramona Koval’s question, which is representative of the tenor of much of the discussion about the teaching of Australian literature in schools, shows that far greater knowledge of the complexity of teaching literature in secondary school is required. Similarly, Brady’s article, which asks Susan Martin, Associate Professor of English at La Trobe University, to list ten must-read Australian texts suggests that it is simply a matter of teachers setting a few texts. This no doubt belies the challenges of teaching heterogeneous national literatures (which go beyond the contemporary, urban texts read by Guest and her peers) to a diverse range of students, in a globalised world and in a high-stakes testing environment dominated by the rhetoric of standards-based reforms. In essence, a greater understanding of the core business of English teachers, and the work they do with texts (national and otherwise) seems necessary. The absence of the voices of English teachers in the recent manifestation of this debate perpetuated by Brady and Koval, reinforces the fact that while the work of English teachers is often discussed, secondary teachers themselves, and those who prepare them for practice, are seldom represented in this public discourse.

*Teaching Australian literature: from classroom conversations to national imaginings* seeks to address this omission. In exploring the complex textual work undertaken in English classrooms, this book aims to move beyond the debates about the teaching of Australian literature that have fed into the development of the new English curriculum that is about to be implemented throughout Australian schools. Further, this book seeks to bridge a divide between the communities of tertiary and secondary teachers of Australian literature that has been exacerbated by positions – represented by Ramona Koval’s question to Bernadette Brennan – that seek to attribute ‘blame’ for the so-called crisis in the teaching of Australian literature. The various essays in the volume recognise the links between teachers and writers of Australian literature in the tertiary and secondary sectors, and the multiple identities and roles experienced by teachers in both sectors. In a small way, the editorial team of
this book represents something of this coalescence of experience and roles. Although currently working in teacher education (Brenton and Larissa) and literary studies (Philip), we have each been secondary teachers, and continue to work closely with the profession. Similarly, although each of us has taught in different tertiary contexts, we all completed doctoral studies in Australian literary studies, and have published in this field.

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By seeking to provide the opportunity for dialogue between the sectors about the teaching of Australian literature, this collection of essays resumes a pluralist conversation between secondary English teachers and literary scholars that stretches back across the second half of the twentieth century. By bringing teachers, teacher educators, creative writers and academics into dialogue, our hope is that the book will succeed in going beyond the terms of those more recent debates, which have often been characterised by entrenched positions and rhetoric that have not been helpful in addressing the issue in question: namely, the place of literature within the secondary English curriculum, and specifically the significance of Australian literature for young people in our schools. There would also no doubt be further professional and educational value in a broader dialogue with tertiary and secondary teachers of Australian history who have been experiencing roughly parallel changes in the understanding of national history within education and similar examples of the media critique of institutional and disciplinary formations (see, for example, Anna Clark’s *History’s Children: History Wars in the Classroom*, 2008, and Furedi, 2011).

We would like to acknowledge that this move towards a shared dialogue between the sectors has been facilitated by the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL). The 2011 ASAL national conference held in Melbourne was titled ‘Teaching Australian Literature: Field, Curriculum, Emotion’ and included a range of presenters talking about teaching practice in tertiary and secondary contexts. This event, convened by Ken Gelder, Susan Martin and Larissa McLean Davies, provided the opportunity for many contributors in this collection, like Bonny Cassidy and Joanne Jones, to discuss ideas about the teaching of Australian literature in their particular contexts. Significantly, it drew attention to the teaching of Australian literature in secondary schools. For example, as part of this conference Brenton Doecke, Graham Parr, Natalie Bellis and Mark Howie presented a symposium on the
complexity of teaching Australian literature in secondary schools locally and internationally. Annette Patterson presented a keynote on the current status of Australian literature in secondary curricula. The opening keynote on digital resourcing, a topic of relevance in this Web 2 age, was presented by John Frow, and is reproduced here.

In the same way that the 2011 ASAL conference sought to bring different stakeholders into a conversation about the teaching of Australian literature, this book comprises chapters written by tertiary teachers of literary studies and teacher educators, secondary English teachers and creative writers, who collectively reaffirm the importance of sustaining a mutually respectful dialogue about the task of teaching literature across the tertiary and secondary sectors. At the same time, an important element of each of these perspectives is the unique educational, institutional and discursive contexts from which they emerge. Secondary English in Australia is being fundamentally influenced by the developing framework of the Australian Curriculum, while tertiary English has a history of disciplinary incoherence that will no doubt continue into the future (see Reid, 1996, p. 106). The contributors to this volume, then, are continually challenged by the contingencies of the professional frameworks within which they work with literature, including Australian texts. The dialogue represented here is always from disparate, problematic and rapidly shifting positions and subjectivities within the education field. As editors of this collection, we feel there is value in attempting to redefine the paths along which this, and further, dialogue might be possible. Relatedly, our aim has been to ensure that the quality of the writing in these chapters will speak to readers beyond secondary English teachers and literary scholars and that the book will be of interest to all people who are concerned about the teaching of Australian writing.

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Current debates about the place of Australian literature in secondary and tertiary syllabuses raise questions about historical memory. The extensive work that both secondary English teachers and academics have done in developing curriculum with a strong focus on Australian writing appears to have been forgotten. We could name several moments of cross-institutional dialogue and collaboration between literary scholars and secondary English teachers that have significantly shaped the development of English curriculum and pedagogy in Australia. The unfolding of secondary English teaching as a
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professional discourse is bound up with the emergence of Australian literary studies as a recognised field of inquiry within the university, as the contributions by A.D. Hope, Leonie Kramer and James McAuley to early issues of English in Australia show. All three were Presidents of the newly formed Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE), suggesting that closer ties existed then between the academy and secondary English teachers than currently. All the early Presidents of the Association were professors, a pattern which was only broken when Garth Boomer was elected to that position in 1981 – all Presidents since then have been either teacher educators or teachers (see http://www.aate.org.au/index.php?id=4).

The contributions that Hope, Kramer and McAuley made to secondary English teaching as a burgeoning field of professional practice, inquiry and scholarship were substantial. An early Presidential address given by A.D. Hope, for example, subsequently published in a 1967 issue of English in Australia, in which he discusses the conditions necessary for English teaching to be recognised as a profession, has over the past decade provided an important point of reference for efforts by the AATE to advocate the professional status of English teachers vis-à-vis managerialist attempts to impose standards for the purpose of individual performance appraisal (Hope, 1967). The AATE (in partnership with the Australian Literacy Educators’ Association (ALEA)) has since published the Standards for Teachers of English Language and Literacy in Australia (STELLA), which provides an important counterpoint to managerialist constructions of their role. Hope’s statement about professionalism features on the STELLA website (see http://www.stella.org.au). Hope affirms the need for the profession to assert its authority ‘in the matter of knowledge’, arguing that ‘teachers in schools must themselves enter the field of research and critical enquiry’ (Hope, 1967, pp. 4–5). On the STELLA website you find narratives written by English teachers, in which they engage in this kind of inquiry, exploring aspects of their professional practice in an effort to convey a sense of the complexity of their work. These narratives include, as it happens, accounts of teaching Australian writers, such as Gwen Harwood and Ruth Park (see narratives by Meredith Maher and Peter Pidduck: http://www.stella.org.au/index.php?id=4).

Another equally pertinent moment in the dialogue between secondary English teachers and literary scholars over the past few decades was the publication by the AATE in 1984 of Ian Reid’s book, The Making of Literature: Texts, Contexts and Classroom Practices. In this volume, Reid provides numerous examples of how to
use Australian literary texts in classrooms, but his key concern is to advocate the value of a pedagogy promoting experimentation, interaction and play (what he calls a ‘workshop’ approach), as opposed to more traditional ways of treating literary works (or a ‘gallery’ approach). Reinforcing this approach is an important chapter in which he draws on the literary-theoretical resources available to him to argue that textual unity should be conceived as the product of the transactions that occur between readers and texts in classrooms and other settings, not as something that inheres within a text. It seems fair to say that this argument resonated with many secondary English teachers when the book was first published, partly because at some point in their professional lives they had all been rudely shaken from a belief that their students would automatically embrace their passion for any literary work or author that they brought into class (cf. Doecke, 1997). The reception of The Making of Literature reflects a vibrant professional culture that existed in the 1980s, but the project outlined in this book continues to appeal to later generations of teachers, not least because classroom contexts continue to be lively interpretive communities where the meaning and value of texts can be a focus for vigorous debate (Bellis, Parr & Doecke, 2009, Gill & Illesca, 2011). To borrow the language of the book that Reid later co-authored with Gale McLachlan, teachers have been prompted to rethink such classroom encounters in terms of the complexities of ‘framing’ and ‘interpretation’, not the least important dimension of which is the ‘extra-textual’ framing that young people bring to their engagement with texts in classroom settings (MacLachlan & Reid, 1994; cf. Parr, 1994; Beavis, 1994).

Perhaps less well known are a set of classroom resources that Ian Reid also developed with secondary English teachers within the theoretical framework that he enunciated in The Making of Literature, namely Writing with a difference (Reid et al., 1988). This set of resources features texts by Australian writers, including Ania Walwicz, Judith Wright, John Manifold, and Elizabeth Jolley. It also outlined strategies with which teachers might enable students to approach their reading in a more provisional way, stepping back from imposing a meaning or formal unity on texts, and cultivating a more reflexive stance with regard to the assumptions they bring to their reading. These resources included Border Territory, an anthology edited by Wendy Morgan, comprising formally innovative narratives written by Australian authors such as Michael Wilding, Peter Carey, Kerryn Goldsworthy, Glenda Adams and Thomas Shapcott, that prompted readers to reflect on their preconceptions about stories, especially the notion that a story is a sequence of events comprising a beginning, a middle and an end (Morgan, 1987). Such a
conventional understanding of a ‘story’ only gets you so far when it comes to exploring the linguistic complexity of any narrative.

We draw attention here to these particular examples of inquiry into literature teaching because the question of the place of Australian literature in the secondary English curriculum can never be a matter of simply incorporating a certain amount or kind of ‘content,’ as Nicole Brady’s article tends to assume. As we have suggested, to think seriously about the ways that Australian writing might figure within English curriculum and pedagogy involves acknowledging the complexity of classrooms as sites for the exploration of meaning, including all that mediates the relationships between students and their teachers as they engage in schooling from day-to-day. This means recognising what students bring to their exchanges in schools and classrooms, something that can become starkly evident when young people resist the texts we present to them as part of the school syllabus. But such resistance need not be seen negatively. In fact, it might be judged to be a healthy sign of the ways in which the exchanges between students and their teachers always exceed the designs of adults when they develop curriculum. Secondary English classrooms are always more complex than any of us can know. They can be sites for rich interpretive play, when students surprise you with the insights they are able to bring to the texts presented to them, offering new readings of texts from standpoints that you have never previously considered.

Another relevant perspective here is that of Douglas Barnes and his distinction between the intended and the enacted curriculum. Barnes’s 1975 study, From Communication to Curriculum offers an account of the ways in which curriculum is negotiated that is congruent with what we have just claimed about the generative nature of the exchanges that occur within classroom settings. Barnes writes:

*When people talk about ‘the school curriculum’ they often mean ‘what teachers plan in advance for their pupils to learn’. But a curriculum made only of teachers’ intentions would be an insubstantial thing from which nobody would learn much. To become meaningful a curriculum has to be enacted by pupils as well as teachers, all of whom have their private lives outside school. By ‘enact’ I mean come together in a meaningful communication – talk, write, read books, collaborate, become angry with one another, learn what to say and do, and how to interpret what others say and do. A curriculum as soon as it becomes more than intentions is embodied in the communicative life of an institution, the talk*
and gestures by which pupils and teachers exchange meanings even when they quarrel or cannot agree. In this sense curriculum is a form of communication. (Barnes, 1975/1992, p. 14)

Barnes’s formulation sounds a useful cautionary note with respect to the rhetoric that has accompanied the introduction of the new Australian Curriculum. Whatever the designs of government with respect to producing a citizenry equipped with the necessary skills and dispositions for the 21st century, the exchanges that occur within classrooms are part of a process by which young people live their daily lives. A lot is at stake when young people enter the school gate, engaging in complex forms of identity work as they negotiate their relationships with one another. The very best English teachers have a lively sense of the social world in which young people operate, and they try to create opportunities in their classrooms for their students to draw on their experiences in order to engage in meaningful communication. This includes enabling them to use and reflect on the rich array of semiotic resources that are available to them, which have obviously transformed the notion of ‘meaningful communication’, as distinct from what Barnes may have understood by this term in 1975.

Many of the examples of classroom exchanges and textual engagement that you will find in this volume reflect the dynamic of implementing curriculum as Barnes envisages it. A.D. Hope’s vision of professionalism involved teachers in schools themselves entering ‘the field of research and critical enquiry’ and assuming the authority that only knowledge can give. All the examples of research that we have just referred to have included sustained classroom inquiry, in which English teachers themselves have played an active role in exploring the complexities of language and meaning, framing and interpretation, as they are played out in classroom settings. These examples have largely been taken from the 1980s, but action research focusing on the teaching of literature has been a continuing feature of English teaching in this country. Taken as a whole, this collection demonstrates that scholarship and research are not only the province of people in the academy, but are also the pursuits of the very best teachers as they reflect on their professional practice. Any dialogue between secondary and tertiary English teachers must be a meeting of equals, in which the knowledge and experience of both parties to the conversation are acknowledged.
The following essays embody a lively conversation in this spirit, and as a consequence, they raise many more questions than we have posed in this introduction.

This volume is being published at a significant moment in the history of English curriculum in Australia, namely the advent of *The Australian Curriculum: English*, as part of the implementation of a national curriculum under the auspices of the Australian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (ACARA). As a consequence, many of the contributors reflect critically on the way Australian literature figures within the new curriculum (see, e.g., essays by Gelder, Plunkett, Cassidy, McLean Davies, Parr and Bellis, Doecke, McClenaghan and Petris.) Some of these chapters provide perspectives on the debates that have shaped the development of the new curriculum, including the question as to why Australian literature should have become such a contentious issue at this moment in time. Does the focus on Australian literature reflect a deeper concern about national identity and belonging? Is this what underpins the rather traditional formulations in *The Australian Curriculum: English* about the importance of the teaching of literature in secondary schools?

These questions, however, obviously point beyond the merits or otherwise of *The Australian Curriculum: English*, raising larger concerns about the significance of a national literature and how a range of contexts (social, cultural, historical, educational) mediate the teaching of literature. Some of the other questions raised by authors in this volume include:

- How have discourses about the importance of a national literature shaped the discipline of English? (Mead, Yandell, Doecke et al.)
- How do national frames of reference inform our reading of literary texts? (Reid, Howie, Mead, Yandell, Macintyre)
- Does the teaching of Australian literature imply a certain type of ethical standpoint? (Gill, Bailey, Gelder)
- How is the teaching of Australian literature bound up with the professional identity of English teachers? (Patterson, Gelder, Healy-Ingram)
- How do issues of canons and canonicity get played out in the teaching of a national literature? (Yandell, McLean Davies, Howie, Doecke et al.)
- What importance is placed on the teaching of a national literature in other countries? (Locke, Yandell)
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- How might post-colonial theory be used to promote engagement in Australian literary texts (Gill, McLean Davies)
- What strategies might we use when teaching Australian texts to students from other nationalities? (Bailey, Parr and Bellis)
- How do curriculum and assessment practices mediate the teaching of Australian literature (Jose, Gelder, McLean Davies, Howie, Dale and Bushnell, Jones)
- How do writers represent the experiences of Indigenous Australians? How might these representations become the focus for discussion in English classrooms? (Healy-Ingram, Gill)
- What role does writing play in the teaching of Australian literature? (Reid, Jose, Cassidy, Plunkett, Parr and Bellis, Doecke et al.)
- How do you teach Australian poetry (Parr and Bellis, Cassidy, Plunkett)
- How might students be encouraged to see Australian literature as a legitimate focus for inquiry? (Mead, Dale and Bushnell, Frow)

All the contributors have engaged in a process of inquiry, each of them responding to critical feedback they have received, and taking their inquiry further, sometimes into new territory that they had not anticipated. The result is a polyphonic collection that explores how Australian literature is taught in a range of contexts, and imagines what the study of national literatures might mean for subject English in the future.

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Notes
1 In Victoria, for example, the study of Australian literature is mandated in the senior years of subject English.
2 Valuable research work is currently being undertaken into the setting and examining of literary texts across the state senior secondary curricula, from 1945 to 2005, by Tim Dolin and John Yiannakis of Curtin University (‘Local canons: institutional authority and the category of the literary in Australian secondary-school English syllabuses,’ ARC funded project, 2010–2012). This research will provide data about regional and generational patterns in text setting and about the framing of reading by syllabus themes and assessment regimes.
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References


Neill, R. (2006) ‘And then there was one: lost for words’, Australian. 2 December, p. 15

