



THE GENIUS OF AUSTRALIA

A Canon of Australia's greatest works of literature and arts will bring forth our best, urges *IPA Review* Editor **Scott Hargreaves**.

Illustration by John Spooner.

Australia needs a Canon of our great works of literature and the creative arts. We need to define and transmit “the best that has been thought, uploaded, downloaded, and/or streamed”, as English theologian Cardinal Newman might have said if he had access to Kindle, Spotify and Netflix. A Canon is at its simplest a list of the great works (great books, great poems, and so on). But it is more than a mere list.

Once upon a time the great battle was to include more Australian works in the Canon of works students should be made to read in our schools and universities. We can now look with envious eyes at the surge of interest in our literary heritage by intellectuals and academics in the middle of the 20th century, which then petered out in the late 20th century. Some put the beginning of this heyday—but also the decline—to an earlier block of time. Geordie Williamson, who in *The Burning Library* (2012) was sufficiently concerned to chronicle under-appreciated writers such as David Ireland, wrote:

For a long time there was no such thing as Australian literature. Then for a while, say the half-century from the publication in 1938 of Xavier Herbert’s *Capricornia*, there was. After which it once again faded from view.

In a similar vein, historian of Australia Frank Bongiorno was able to refer to a ‘golden age’ of Australian history from the 1960s to the 1980s, explaining:

From the beginning of the 1960s, the end of empire, the eclipse of Australian Britishness and the emergence of the so-called new nationalism formed the background to the rise of Australian history. In many ways, the prominence of the subject in the public sphere reflected the generational experience of those who had come to adulthood in the 1950s and 1960s

and felt there had been insufficient access to Australian culture in their formal education.

Rather than rally to the cause, the literary establishment rejected the call to arms. An article in *The Guardian* by essayist and writer of fiction, John Kinsella, carried the unequivocal headline, ‘An Australian canon will only damage Australian literature’:

Of course, literary history proffers its salient and pivotal points ... but once we start declaring what they should be, especially when foisting a national literature on students/readers, and how and why they should be taught in universities, we are blatantly gatekeeping: setting agendas of control and manipulation.

Interestingly, within the cultural left there is a dawning realisation of what has been lost. Writer and columnist Monica Dux devoted a recent column to a lament that her children had little (if any) knowledge of so basic a cultural artefact as *Waltzing Matilda*:

I felt a strange mix of pride and sadness at discovering my children’s ignorance about *Waltzing Matilda*. My own childhood was awash with Australiana. Growing up, I sang *Waltzing Matilda* countless times, but also other bush ballads, such as *The Wild Colonial Boy*.

A reason typically given by the ruling intellectual caste for giving up on the Canon is that Australia has changed too much to make one desirable or feasible. The arrival of millions of immigrants post-World War II, increasingly from outside the traditional source of the British Isles, was said to make older ideas of national identity redundant (this was the essence of Bongiorno’s argument). But why should it? A vast majority of Australians still have ancestral linkages that make the world described by the Colonial

writers and/or the 20th century Australian writers very much part of their personal story. For those who came later, why assume they have no interest in the history of the country they now call home, or from whence sprung the people with whom they converse and work and love and fight with every day of their Australian life?

The lack of focus on Australian history is concerning.

I imagine a child born in Australia of, say, Indian parents, will always feel a special connection to his or her parents' culture and homeland, but the life they live is here and must be comprehended. Engaging with the Canon is one way for them to learn; and indeed they will find the immigrant experience is not unrepresented. Our greatest historian, Geoffrey Blainey, said in *A Land Half Won* (1980):

The continent had to be discovered emotionally. It had to become a homeland and feel like home. The sense of overpowering space, the isolation, the warmth of summer, the garish light, the shiny-leafed trees, the birds and insects, the smell of air filled with dust, the strange silences, and the landscapes in all their oddness had to become familiar.

Here he was speaking of the early settlers; but isn't it the same for each more recent arrival to this country? We know from experience that each generation of new arrivals (and their children, straddling two worlds) make their own contributions to the Canon, enriching the national story for all. A fish is said not to know it swims in water; similarly, people may

not be consciously aware of the culture from which they have sprung. But people with a sense of where they are from will have a better idea of where they might wish to go. If the culture is never examined or considered, then in our globalised age what washes through will be just the thin soup of global consumer and media culture. The values of work will be shaped by LinkedIn; the values of social life shaped by Facebook and Instagram; political ideas will be imported from the USA, as we have seen in Black Lives Matter; environmental ideas will be imported from Europe, as we have seen with Extinction Rebellion (and indeed The Greens, *Die Grünen* in the German original); books—to the extent they are read at all—will be ordered upon Amazon's recommendations; and recreational viewing on the programs of the Netflix Top 10 and the Disney behemoth.

The risk is that a people and nation without their own reservoir of culture will become a kind of client state of a pervasive globalised culture. After 250 years of struggle, Australia would in one sense again be just a colonial outpost, but this time without the dreams of independence and the search for a national character that so exercised writers and poets in the 19th and 20th centuries. As Monica Dux put it, in her reflection on *Waltzing Matilda's* disappearance:

But it's not just my aversion to jingoism that has resulted in a pair of children who can't sing a single bush ballad. It has more to do with the internationalised world they inhabit, one that all too often obscures what's local and home-grown. And that's where my twinge of sadness came in.

Research by the IPA's Bella d'Abrera, Director of the Foundations of Western Civilisation Program, has identified the concerning lack of focus on Australian history in our school curriculum and in our universities. In response, the IPA is providing educational materials directly, including videos, books,



Nick Cave, writer of *Red Right Hand* (1994), in 2017.

Photo: Geoff Dude/Flickr

and curriculum materials. But it is a fact that perhaps the best way to learn is through stories, and reading stories and watching dramas unfold on screen can be a great way to connect with our past and what it means to be Australian; and so providing a guide as to what to read and what to watch becomes invaluable. As American writer Jacques Barzun said of his own country many years ago: “The old plan and purpose of teaching the young what they truly need to know survives only in the private sector.”

This is why the IPA, under the auspices of the Centre for the Australian Way of Life, has decided to establish an Australian Canon. A major focus will be young Australians who have in their education missed not just the opportunity for guided engagement with the great works of our society, but even the knowledge that it is important and rewarding to do so. But in so doing it will also be of interest to all Australians who in their spare time explore their own heritage, and that of

their nation. My previous article on this topic was titled ‘Australia, It’s Up to You’ to capture this sense that ordinary Australians must take up the challenge. The IPA can, however, provide resources, support, inspiration, and the moral courage to take a stand for Australia.

The Centre for the Australian Way of Life (CAWL) was launched by the IPA in 2021 to be “a centre of cultural and intellectual influence and authority”.

Foundational commitments appear on the Centre’s webpage at australia.ipa.org.au:

- › The Centre defends and extends the Australian way of life. It is the voice for mainstream Australians and their values.
- › Australia’s unique way of life is characterised by hard work, the fair go, free enterprise, small business, egalitarianism, freedom of speech,

and respect for the traditions of Western Civilisation.

- It has created prosperity, opportunity, and freedom to an extent unknown anywhere else.
- But the Australian way of life is under threat like never before.
- The ruling class have become detached from mainstream Australians. They have torn the country in two and abandoned the values and institutions that made Australia great.
- The Centre for the Australian Way of Life provides the courage, ideas, and policies needed to protect our freedoms, our prosperity, and our way of life.

A. B. Facey, in his autobiographical *A Fortunate Life*, captured many aspects of the Australian Way of Life, certainly as it was in the early years of the 20th century, but also as it can be now, if we take charge. It records his courage and losses at Gallipoli, but also records his battles for a fair go as a veteran, union leader, and civic leader. I don't know that Facey is describing *the* national character, but he is certainly reporting and displaying a character from which we should draw strength and inspiration. He is in the ancient sense a hero, and a national hero at that. That is why his book is in the Canon.

And the Canon must have music. Humans express their most deeply felt emotions and connect with their friends, communities, and nations through music. The communal celebrations associated with the songs and dance of Indigenous Australians are one way of plumbing the depths of what music means to us all. When Bennelong and Yemmerrawanne went to London along with the first Governor of NSW, Arthur Phillip, “far from their Wangal homeland on the south bank of the Parramatta River in Sydney”, they performed a song “in praise of lovers” for an appreciative audience,

and the music was transcribed in Western notation. When the magnificent elder of the Wurundjeri people, William Barak, was given the opportunity to paint using Western materials, his frequent subject was the corroborees of his people, capturing on canvas the fusion of song and dance.

Russel Ward in *The Australian Legend* (1958) was perhaps the first academic to systematically explore the old Australian bush ballads and what they meant to the people who sang them, and in so doing helped along a popular revival of the form (search YouTube for ‘Wallis and Matilda’) that lasted for decades before its current hiatus. But it is not all academic. We might (and will) wonder about the later 20th century picture of a group of young and mostly drunk Australians arm in arm in a bar in Bali engaged in a raucous and indistinct singalong with Cold Chisel’s *Khe Sanh*? Or even how original punk and goth rocker Nick Cave could—in *Red Right Hand*—borrow from the genre of Southern Gothic and turn the streetscapes and watercourses of a town so unremarkable as Wangaratta into something completely mythic, universal, and spine tingling.

A podcast titled *The Genius of Australia* is being recorded.

Similarly, we have a tradition of the visual arts in which specific paintings—particularly landscapes—become inseparable from the national story and our relationship with the bush, the sea, the sky, and other features of our natural environment. The Heidelberg School of Roberts, Streeton, Conder and McCubbin is rightly appreciated to this day, while Brett Whitely supplied the mental notation for imagining Sydney Harbour at its most magnificent under a sky of cobalt

blue. To draw out the qualities and wider meaning of the key works we will be engaging with multiple authors and artists with deep understanding of the works in the Canon. One means will be a podcast series titled *The Genius of Australia*.

We will literally be saying: “you must read this”.

How did we select the Canon? Artistic and literary merit is of course a prime consideration, but not the only one. The great literary critic Harold Bloom said artists decide what should be in a Canon. Perhaps that is the case if all we want is literature for its own sake, but a national Canon must have more than that. And so we have also looked for works which speak to our national character, and may have helped form it. We have, for instance, included the remarkable *Sacrifice*, housed in the Hall of Silence at the Anzac Memorial, Hyde Park, Sydney. At one level this brings to mind how the mothers of Ancient Greece reputedly bid farewell to their sons marching off to war: “Come back with your shield—or on it.” Truly did the Anzacs honour their mothers and country with their valour in a pitiless struggle. But the sculpture by George Rayner Hoff is also, as the accompanying text describes:

A physical expression of the spirit and legend of the Anzac—
Honouring service, and the
Courage, Endurance, and Sacrifice
by all servicemen, servicewomen
and their families.

While echoing the description of the Greeks by a Roman writer, Plutarch, the image of the fallen soldier is also unmistakably

Christian. This is not accidental. As the Australian historian John Moses explained in the Autumn 2021 edition of the *IPA Review*, the original conception of Anzac Day in the immediate post-war period was inherently Christian. Reconfiguring the crucifixion as sacrifice is the core symbolic transformation of the New Testament, and this sculpture is in the lineage of more than a millennia of Christian art. One does not have to be Christian to appreciate our fallen soldiers, but one should have some understanding of the cultural heritage and the symbolic language that informs how we commemorate them.

In selecting works for the Canon longevity should also be a guide; it is a test of how a work resonates with the people. While *Waltzing Matilda* fades, as children are no longer taught to sing it in schools, we might note *My Brilliant Career* by Miles Franklin was published in 1901 but has never been out of print. Other works may be added in due course, on the same criteria. No Canon can ever be truly definitive, but we have here captured the essentials. Another criterion is the hope that every Australian would be familiar with the work (which is one of the reasons why we have—for the moment—set to one side groupings of more specialist artistic endeavours like sculpture, architecture and the performing arts).

For a song like *Waltzing Matilda*, a poem like *Clancy of the Overflow*, or a short(-ish) and very entertaining read like *My Brilliant Career* by Miles Franklin, this is an attainable goal. We will literally be saying: “you must read this” (while in the case of the latter saying, at least watch the excellent 1979 movie with Judy Davis). For this reason too we have selected not books of poetry by our best-known poets, but rather particular poems. I would rather a young Australian read *one* poem by the ‘Bard of Bunyah’, Les Murray, than be daunted by a recommendation to read a publication from just one period of a long career, or even a collected works. I want *Noonday Axeman* to be a gateway drug to the sensibility of a very fine poet and patriot. But then as well as the very popular (and



Holden HK Monaro GTS 327.

Photo: Sicbird/Wikimedia Commons

accessible) *The Getting of Wisdom*, by Henry Handel Richardson, we have also included that author's epic trilogy, *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, which chronicles the rise and fall of an Anglo-Irish doctor who travelled to Australia to seek his fortune on Ballarat's goldfields. When the third volume of the trilogy was published in 1929 it received rave reviews and sold extremely well around the world. Selection by the Book of the Month Club in America had an effect on sales and publicity akin to what endorsement by Oprah or Reese Witherspoon achieves nowadays. A work of high literary merit, it paints an unforgettable picture of a man unable to ever come to grips with the country to which he had emigrated, its landscape, its very different class system, or its people. Around him arise an unforgettable cast of characters, including his redoubtable wife, Mary, and figures from public life. His attempts to return to England, "home", were no substitute for his restlessness that ultimately had tragic consequences. So it

is possible relatively few Australians will be up for the challenge of this book (no probs, as my mate Sal says), but through the readings and the podcasts of *The Genius of Australia* they can better understand the heights to which our literature can reach, and consider how it bears on fundamental questions of our national character and development as a nation. I would say the same to anyone who sees Patrick White on the list, and says (in a very Australian way), "yeah, nah".

The Canon is presented here as a bare list. We at the IPA very much look forward to providing you with experiences in coming months that will shed light on each of these works, and why they have been selected. As you engage with each one through reading, watching, listening or viewing, your sense of our history and the national character can only be enhanced. The Australian Way of Life—the one we have had, and we want to endure—will be illuminated in fresh and important ways.

THE AUSTRALIAN CANON

NOVELS/SHORT STORIES



Marcus Clarke, *For the Term of His Natural Life*, 1870
Henry Lawson, *The Drover's Wife*, 1892
Ethel Turner's *Seven Little Australians*, 1894
Ethel Pedley, *Dot and the Kangaroo*, 1899
Miles Franklin, *My Brilliant Career*, 1901
Jeannie Gunn, *We of the Never Never*, 1908
Henry Handel Richardson, *The Getting of Wisdom*, 1910
Henry Handel Richardson, *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, Vols. I-III, 1917-1930
Norman Lindsay, *The Magic Pudding*, 1918
Frederic Manning, *The Middle Parts of Fortune*, 1929
Ruth Park, *The Harp in the South*, 1948
Nevil Shute, *A Town Like Alice*, 1950
Patrick White, *Voss*, 1957
George Johnston, *My Brother Jack*, 1964
Thomas Keneally, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, 1972
David Malouf, *Johnno*, 1975
Xavier Herbert, *Poor Fellow My Country*, 1975
David Ireland, *The Glass Canoe*, 1976
Helen Garner, *Monkey Grip*, 1977
Robert Drewe, *The Bodysurfers*, 1983
Peter Carey, *Oscar and Lucinda*, 1988
Tim Winton, *Cloudstreet*, 1991
John Marsden, *Tomorrow, When the War Began*, 1993
Peter Temple, *Bad Debts*, 1996
Christos Tsiolkas, *The Slap*, 2008

MOVIES



Michael Powell, <i>They're A Weird Mob</i> , 1966	P. J. Hogan, <i>Muriel's Wedding</i> , 1994
Nicolas Roeg, <i>Walkabout</i> , 1971	Rob Sitch, <i>The Castle</i> , 1997
Ted Kotcheff, <i>Wake In Fright</i> , 1971	Kate Woods, <i>Looking for Alibrandi</i> , 2000
David Williamson, <i>Don's Party</i> , 1971	John Curran, <i>Tracks</i> , 2013
Peter Weir, <i>Picnic at Hanging Rock</i> , 1975	Bruce Beresford, <i>Ladies in Black</i> , 2018
Colin Thiele, <i>Storm Boy</i> , 1976	Kriv Stenders, <i>Danger Close: The Battle of Long Tan</i> , 2019
George Miller, <i>Mad Max</i> , 1979	Robert Connolly, <i>The Dry</i> , 2020
Gillian Armstrong, <i>My Brilliant Career</i> , 1979	
Peter Weir, <i>Gallipoli</i> , 1981	
Peter Faiman, <i>Croccodile Dundee</i> , 1986	

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POEMS



- Caroline Carleton, *The Song of Australia*, 1859
Banjo Paterson, *Clancy of the Overflow*, 1889
Banjo Paterson, *Waltzing Matilda*, 1895
Dorothea Mackellar, *My Country*, 1904
A.D. Hope, *Australia*, 1938
Ken Slessor, *Five Bells*, 1939
Dame Mary Gilmore, *No Foe Shall Gather Our Harvest*, 1940
Oodgeroo Noonuccal, *The Dispossessed*, 1964
Les Murray, *Noonday Axeman*, 1965
Bruce Dawe, *Life Cycle*, 2009
Sarah Day, *A Dry Winter: Some Observations About Rain*, 2009

SONGS



- Trad., *Wild Colonial Boy*, 19th century
Skipper Francis, *Australia Will Be There*, 1915
Eric Bogle, *And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda*, 1971
AC/DC, *It's a Long Way to The Top (If You Wanna Rock and Roll)*, 1976
The Saints, *(I'm) Stranded*, 1976
Cold Chisel, *Khe Sanh*, 1978
Peter Allen, *I Still Call Australia Home*, 1980
Icehouse, *Great Southern Land*, 1982
Redgum, *I Was Only Nineteen*, 1983
John Farnham, *You're The Voice*, 1986
Neil Murray, *My Island Home*, 1987
Slim Dusty, *G'day G'day*, 1988
Yothu Yindi, *Treaty*, 1991
Nick Cave, *Red Right Hand*, 1994

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ART



- Eugene von Guérard, *Mount Abrupt, the Grampians, Victoria*, 1856
Tom Roberts, *Shearing the Rams*, 1890
William Barak, *Corroboree*, 1895
Frederick McCubbin, *The Pioneer*, 1904
George Rayner Hoff, *Sacrifice*, ANZAC Memorial, Hyde Park, NSW, 1934
Sidney Nolan, *First-class Marksman (Ned Kelly series)*, 1946
Russell Drysdale, *The Cricketers*, 1948
Albert Namatjira, *Central Australian Landscape*, 1953
Margaret Olley, *Susan with Flowers*, 1962
GMH, *Monaro*, 1968
Fred Williams, *Dight's Falls*, 1974
Brett Whiteley, *The Jacaranda Tree (On Sydney Harbour)*, 1977
Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri, *Warlugulong*, 1977
John Olsen, *Lake Eyre Channel Country*, 2011

LIVES



- Judith Wright, *The Generations of Men*, 1959
Clive James, *Unreliable Memoirs*, 1980
A.B. Facey, *A Fortunate Life*, 1981
Geoffrey Serle, *John Monash: A Biography*, 1982
David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life*, 1992
Raimond Gaita, *Romulus, My Father*, 1998
Jimmy Barnes, *Working Class Boy*, 2016

HISTORIES



- Watkin Tench, *Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson*, 1793
W.K. Hancock, *Australia*, 1930
Russell Ward, *The Australian Legend*, 1958
Mary Durack, *Kings in Grass Castles*, 1959
Donald Horne, *The Lucky Country*, 1964
Geoffrey Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance: How Distance Shaped Australia's History*, 1966
Michael Cathcart, *Manning Clark's History of Australia*, 1989
David Kemp, *A Liberal State: How Australians Chose Liberalism over Socialism 1926-1966*, 2021

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