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Book Publishing in Western Australia: A World Elsewhere

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This article examines the role of book publishing outside the cultural centres, where the lack of access to the gatekeepers of cultural production, such as literary agents, editors and publishers, has inhibited both the publishers' and region's reach into the public imagination. It takes Western Australia as a case study, analysing the impact of geographical regionalism on the processes of book production and publication. Western Australia is infrequently represented in the cultural record, much less in those aspects of the cultural record that are transmitted overseas. This imbalance in 'cultural currency' arises because regions are at least in part defined by their ability to participate in what Pierre Bourdieu has deemed the 'field of cultural production'. In the case of print culture, this field includes writers, literary agents, editors, publishers, government arts organisations, the media, schools, and book retailers, just to name a few.

This article pays particular attention to Western Australia's three major publishing houses (Fremantle Press, University of Western Australia Press, and the publisher of Indigenous literature, Magabala Books), as well as those Western Australian writers who have achieved the greatest international success, such as Tim Winton and Elizabeth Jolley. It demonstrates that the awareness of geographically and culturally diverse regions within the framework of the nation is derived from representations of these regions and their associated regional characteristics in the movies, television and books.

Keywords: Australian literature, regional literature, regionalism, Western Australia, book publishing, print culture

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I. Introduction

The Australian state of Western Australia is the second largest subnational entity in the world—nearly four times the size of Texas—and yet most Americans are unfamiliar with the term and the geographical area it represents. They know Sydney and maybe Melbourne, on Australia’s east coast. Similarly, Australians are unfamiliar with the American Midwest. Instead, they know New York, Boston, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, Seattle, and so forth. It is common for Australians to speak knowledgeably about the East and West Coasts of the United States, as well as the South.

The relevant point here is not that Australians are better at geography than Americans, but rather that the awareness of geographically and culturally diverse regions within the framework of the nation is derived from representations of these regions and their associated regional characteristics in the movies, television and books. It is no accident that many Australians are unfamiliar with the Midwest, as the region is infrequently represented in the cultural record, much less in those aspects of the cultural record that are transmitted overseas. The same goes for Americans and their familiarity with Western Australia. This imbalance in ‘cultural currency’ arises because regions are at least in part defined by their ability to participate in what Pierre Bourdieu has deemed the ‘field of cultural production’. In the case of print culture, this field includes writers, literary agents, editors, publishers, government arts organisations, the media, schools, book clubs, and book retailers, just to name a few.

This article examines the role of book publishing outside the cultural centres, where the lack of access to the gate-keepers of cultural production, such as literary agents, editors and publishers, has inhibited both the publishers’ and region’s reach into the public imagination. It takes Western Australia as a case study, analysing the impact of geographical regionalism on the processes of book production and publication in its three

major publishing houses—University of Western Australia Press, Fremantle Arts Centre Press and Magabala Books—and for its writers.

II. Literary regionalism in Australia

In the United States, literary regionalism first emerged as a genre in the second half of the nineteenth century, shortly after the conclusion of the Civil War. ‘Local colour stories’, as they were often referred to, filled the pages of leading magazines with descriptions of customs and recreated dialects until the end of the century. Regionalism later resurged in the 1920s and again in the 1980s, during which periods critics first began to debate whether it was just nostalgic ‘local colour’, or if regional literature instead offered resistance to and a critique of some dominant cultural groups.

In contrast to the United States, the conversation about regionalism in Australia, and especially with regard to Australian literature, did not begin to take shape until the late 1970s. However, its development had been foreshadowed by a long-standing tradition of political regionalism. In fact, state-based political regionalism in Australia has been around since the early days of European settlement, white Australia having been founded not as Australia but as a bunch of separate British colonies. One often cited example of state-based political regionalism in Australia is the different railway gauges that were adopted in different Australian states, which meant travellers had to change trains where the different rail lines met at the state border. But perhaps a more striking example of Australia’s long-standing tradition of political regionalism is the threat of secession from the rest of Australia that has been part of Western Australia’s political landscape since shortly after the foundation of Australia in 1901. In fact, a vote to secede passed with a 2/3 majority in a 1933 referendum, though this bid was subsequently rejected by the British Parliament. There were again rumblings of Western Australian

secession in the 1970s.

Australian literary regionalism of the 1970s was clearly foreshadowed by political regionalism, but it was not until October 1978 that the elements necessary to spark a substantial critical debate on the subject of regionalism in Australian literature finally began to coalesce. This landmark event occurred at a seminar organised to explore the theme of 'Time, Place and People: Regionalism in Contemporary Australian Literature'. The published versions of the speeches delivered at this seminar provided the basis for much future discussion, as well as formally introduced the terms and ideas against which many future critics reacted.

The conversation gained momentum in the early 1980s when Western Australian academic Bruce Bennett began actively promulgating regionalism as a critical framework for understanding Australian literature. Bennett was the most prolific advocate of

a study of regions from the ground up: commencing with particular places, the biographical connections of writers with these places and their literary references to, or recreations of these places, together with a study of their intellectual and cultural milieux.¹

It was around this time that significant numbers of state-based or regional literature anthologies first began to be published. Regionalism and regional literature did not become an Australian preoccupation until the late 1970s and into the 1980s. However, during these two decades, thirteen regional literature anthologies were published in Western Australia, for example, whereas only two had been published in the previous 150 years of white settlement. The conversation beginning in the late 1970s showcased an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the historical and contemporary influences at work in any conception or reception of regional literature, which the earlier anthologies

lacked.

Since the 1980s, however, not a single literature anthology has been published that explicitly acknowledges it is composed of Western Australian writers. Instead, several anthologies of Western Australian literature have been published that are packaged to appear generically Australian or organised around certain themes, such as *Summer Days: Stories from Childhood*. It seems that by the early 1990s, the conversation about literary regionalism in Australia had largely died out.

Changes in government policy with regard to literature and the arts played a significant role both in shaping and dismantling critical interest in the subjects of regionalism and regional literature. David Headon discusses this theory in the introduction to a regional anthology, *North of the Ten Commandments: A Collection of Northern Territory Literature*:

The Literature Board of the Australia Council, since its inception during the Whitlam Labor Government years (1972-75), has played a major role in the encouragement of cultural diversification. One important by-product has been the ... interest in 'regional' literature.²

The most notable change that accompanied the shift from the Commonwealth Literary Fund (CLF) to the Literature Board in 1973 was the sudden influx of funds. 'The CLF in its last financial year had a budget of \$250,000. The Literature Board began with a budget increase to just over one million dollars.'³ In addition to the obvious shot in the arm this source of new money gave more generally to Australian writers and writing, it came with an expectation that it would be distributed equitably among the citizens of this vast nation.

New avenues for publication were opened with the help of Literature Board funding, including several specifically devoted to the promotion of regional interests. The 1980s saw the founding of regionally based literary magazines such as *Island Magazine* in Tasmania and *Northern Perspective* in the Northern Territory. Clearly, ‘magazines can be made or marred by the times’.⁴ Furthermore, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, a publishing house exclusively dedicated to the publication of works by Western Australian writers, was established in 1975 with Literature Board funding and went on to become a model for regional publishing operations across Australia.

III. Book publishing in Western Australia

Fremantle Arts Centre Press was not the first book publishing house established in Western Australia. That title belongs to the University of Western Australia Press, or UWA Press, which was established in 1935 to publish less expensive and more relevant textbooks than those imported from British publishers. UWA Press has since left off publishing textbooks, and instead has built its identity as an academic publisher with a regional or Western Australian focus. Its list is especially strong in the areas of Western Australian history, and natural and environmental sciences. Since the 1990s, UWA Press has diversified its list further to include children’s titles, as well as titles with more popular or commercial appeal intended for the general trade audience. The pool of talented writers it draws upon has, consequently, also been stretched far beyond its traditional base in academia. In 2005, the Press began publishing fiction; initially, it limited the manuscripts it would consider to those received from students enrolled in university courses in creative writing around Australia, but even this restriction has since been dropped.⁵

While UWA Press receives a subsidy from the university, without which it would

be unable to continue its operations, the other two Western Australian publishing houses—the previously mentioned Fremantle Arts Centre Press and Magabala Books, an Indigenous Australian publishing house located in the far northwest of Western Australia—benefit from substantial government assistance. Both are classified as arts agencies and receive an annual grant from the Western Australian government, in addition to being assisted by the Federal Government through its arts funding and advisory body. This has been the order of things since Fremantle Arts Centre Press became the next major entrant into the Western Australian publishing scene in 1975, 40 years after the founding of UWA Press.

At the time of its founding, approximately 75% of its funding came from the aforementioned sources, with book sales comprising the remaining 25% of its income. More recently, the levels of State and Federal funding have fallen to approximately 15% of the Press's income, though considering Fremantle Arts Centre Press now has an annual income of more than one million dollars, this is still a considerable sum.

Fremantle Arts Centre Press was established 'with the aim of developing the widest possible audience for outstanding Western Australian writers and artists'.⁶ One of the earliest writers published by the Press was Elizabeth Jolley, who had received rejection letters from nearly every publisher in Australia prior to being taken up by the upstart company. Jolley went on to achieve national and international acclaim. When she died in 2007, an obituary appeared in the *New York Times*, capping a career of high-profile reviews of her books in the most internationally acclaimed magazines, journals and newspapers, including the lead story in an issue of *The New York Times Book Review*.

However, it was two titles with a distinctly more local or national appeal that consolidated the Press's reputation in the Australian book trade: A.B. Facey's *A Fortunate Life*, which is a memoir of the classic 'Aussie battler' growing up in the early part of the

20th century, and Sally Morgan's *My Place*, a milestone in Indigenous writing in Australia, in which Morgan writes of her quest to discover her hidden Aboriginal heritage. *A Fortunate Life* and *My Place*, published in 1981 and 1987 respectively, have both sold over a half-million copies.

When discussing book sales in Australia, it is important to bear in mind that Australia's population is only a little over 20 million, whereas the United States, for example, has a population in excess of 300 million. Therefore,

in Australia, sales of roughly 2,500+ in trade paperback are respectable and 5,000+ are good. In ... mass-market paperback ... the approximate figures are 4,000+ and 10,000+. Less than 200 books (in all formats, non-fiction as well as fiction) would sell more than 20,000 copies in a year. ... In the US ... for mass-market paperback, the approximate figures would be 15,000+ and 40,000+.⁷

According to these figures, selling a half-million copies in Australia is comparable to selling two million copies of a book in the United States. In fact, in terms of market penetration, the figure of two million does not even come close to representing the ubiquity of these two Fremantle Arts Centre Press titles. A half-million copies sold to a population of 20 million means that approximately one in every 40 people has purchased a copy of both *A Fortunate Life* and *My Place*. To have the same level of saturation of the American market, you would have to sell 7.5 million copies of a given title.

Just as Fremantle Arts Centre Press publishes only the work of Western Australians, Magabala Books publishes only the work of Aboriginal writers and illustrators, including children's books, historical and autobiographical works, as well as poetry and fiction. It is, however, open to submissions from Aboriginal writers across the

nation, in spite of its remote position. Magabala Books was founded in 1987 with a government grant and in 1990 became an independent Aboriginal corporation, managed by an all-Aboriginal management committee. It is often credited with being the country's first Indigenous publishing company, even though two other publishing houses, Aboriginal Studies Press and Institute of Aboriginal Development Press, were established earlier (in 1964 and 1972, respectively); in their early years, however, neither was exclusively devoted to publishing works by Aboriginal creators, but rather also considered works by non-Indigenous writers on Indigenous issues. It is worth noting that 'there [are] no all-Black publishing houses in Australia'.⁸ Debates persist about what constitutes 'Aboriginal publishing' and how the definition of this term has changed shape or provoked contestation over the years.

There are, of course, other publishers in Western Australia beyond the three that I have mentioned. The Australian Bureau of Statistics does not have statistics that are specific to Western Australian publishing, but it counts 234 businesses in Australia whose main activity is book publishing.⁹ This number is very close to that found in *The Australian Writer's Marketplace*, a book that is often referred to as 'the Bible' for Australian writers, which in its 2006 edition counted 201 publishers. Therefore, I feel reasonably comfortable using the numbers they have for Western Australian publishers: 12 publishers in Western Australia in 2006, which is approximately 6% of the total number of publishing houses operating in Australia.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, nearly 94% of all books sold in Australia that were published by Australian publishers, came from publishing houses based in New South Wales or Victoria (where nearly 60% of the Australian population resides).¹⁰ Sales of books produced in Western Australia make up an unspecified amount less than 1% of all book sales in Australia, in which the book was produced by an

Australian publisher. The mind boggles at the infinitesimally small percentage Western Australian publishers occupy of total book sales in Australia, including both Australian and imported titles. This, in spite of the fact that Western Australia represents 10% of the Australian population. Of course, it is largely due to the concentration in Sydney and Melbourne of large, multinational publishing houses.

Nonetheless, the three publishers identified above—University of Western Australia Press, Fremantle Arts Centre Press and Magabala Books—would produce the majority of Western Australian publishing’s modest sales figures, since the other Western Australian publishers are primarily hobby or vanity publishers.

IV. The impact of geographical regionalism

UWA Press and Fremantle Arts Centre Press both have a mandate to privilege Western Australian material, contributors and subject matter as part of their *raison d’être* as regional publishers. In other words, they responded to the prospect of national exclusionism favouring Sydney- and Melbourne-centric cultural production by establishing regionalist ‘gatekeeping’ mechanisms of their own. From the early days, they attempted to make a virtue and a defining feature of regionalism in the development of their lists, their profile and their role in national literary and intellectual culture. This is an understandable development given that the capital city of Western Australia, Perth, where these two presses are located, is the most isolated city with a population over one million in the world; at just under 2,000 miles, it is closer to Jakarta, Indonesia, than it is to Sydney.

Despite its overtly regionalist policies and perspectives, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, in particular, has had a disproportionate impact on the national literary and cultural scene. Just under 35 years old, Fremantle Arts Centre Press has produced a number of

books that have shaped the way in which Australians and others have come to know and think about ‘Australia’. Fremantle Arts Centre Press has been a national player as a publisher, at least in the sense of re-routing public consciousness and the ‘national imagination’, and this seems to set it apart in a number of senses from both UWA Press and Magabala Books, both of which have had different (and arguably lesser) kinds of impacts, though Magabala is a special case as the country’s first Indigenous publishing house.

Some critics maintain that regional publishers are always struggling to penetrate the centre, to become national players that just *happen* to be located on the far edge of the world—a nearly impossible task given the odds stacked against them, including lack of access to the gatekeeping mechanisms of cultural production and high distribution costs. Then again, others see them as ‘active agents in attempting to redefine cultural traffic by excluding the work of those who do not meet the regionalist criteria they have themselves asserted’.¹¹ This articulation, while initially it sounds more positive, is often followed by the rejoinder that perhaps any failure of regional publishing houses to reach the broader national or international public imagination is their own fault, a consequence of their defiantly regionalist perspective.

However, some regional publishers—and this applies, I think, to Western Australia’s three major publishing houses—can be more usefully conceptualised as attempting to penetrate that same centre by presenting themselves, not as someone that *happens* to be from elsewhere, but as a readily identifiable, regional quantity. Rather than Western Australian writers simply being overlooked, by labelling them as Western Australian and gathering them under the masthead of a Western Australian publisher, you call attention to their presence and, thus, increase their chances of penetrating a national market. This is exactly what happened with such Western Australian writers as Elizabeth

Jolley, Gail Jones, John Kinsella, Joan London, and Kim Scott. Perhaps any failure to reach the broader national or international public imagination, as evidenced by a failure to even approach (much less repeat) the successes of Fremantle Arts Centre Press in the 1980s, is a function of falling away from that ‘defiantly regionalist perspective’, rather than of adhering too closely to it. Among those examples that give one pause to think: the Western Australian writer Tim Winton, who regularly writes bestsellers that also win literary prizes and was recently voted the most popular living Australian writer, is renowned for his ‘Western Australian-ness’ and for being a ‘defiantly regionalist’ writer.

Furthermore, the much-discussed ‘decline of the literary paradigm’ in Australian (and, indeed, international) literature—that is, the decline of interest in ‘high-brow’ or ‘literary’ fiction and non-fiction—neatly parallels the decline of interest in regional literature and issues of regionalism in Australia.¹² Consequently, regional publishers and commentators alike have been inclined to blame subsequent difficulties on this change of fortunes, the fallout of ‘profound economic, technological, political and ... cultural changes, since the late 1960s’, but which really gained momentum in the 1990s.¹³ Fremantle Arts Centre Press’s 1996 funding agreement with the Western Australian government, for example, reduced funding by 50% over a period of three years and contained a new productivity clause. This agreement did not state that the Press should pursue a more ‘commercial’, as opposed to ‘literary’, route; however, in meetings with the minister to challenge the funding cut, he advised that his intention was to force the Press to do exactly this.¹⁴ It was previously noted that UWA Press also diversified its list in the 1990s to include titles with more popular or commercial appeal. Both presses arrived at the unique makeup of their current publishing programs in response to larger changes in the field of cultural production, including economic and political changes.

While these changes may have seemed unavoidable at the time, and they were the

same sorts of changes being undertaken by publishers in the traditional publishing centres of Sydney and Melbourne, they were largely self-defeating for regional publishers. After all, the interests of the 'literary paradigm' do not exactly tally with those of regional publishers and literature. Succumbing to the pressures to produce more 'commercial' books, such as cookbooks, gardening books and young adult fiction, has in many ways eliminated those aspects that established these regional presses as remarkable in the first place, in particular their attention to regional developments. What is needed is a more commercial publishing program for regional publishers, where 'commercial' is not equivalent to 'generic'. After all, it is not enough for a regional publishing house to publish books that are just as good as those published by the major multinational publishers in the cultural centres of the country, because the latter publishers will be able to produce theirs more cheaply and provide them with better distribution, marketing and promotion. Instead, regional publishers must either produce work that is of demonstrably higher quality, or that is unique and can generate its own publicity, given that their budgets rarely extend to extensive print (much less, television) advertising campaigns.

One way in which a regional publisher can achieve this effect is by actively promoting the regional, and therefore unique, qualities of its writers and stories, as well as the geographic regionalism of the publisher itself, which can sometimes act as an intriguing opening to a book review or feature article. It is important for regional publishers to remember that regional literature is first and foremost literature possessing cultural value that is specific to a region, though not necessarily to the exclusion of national or international cultural value. Or, put another way, 'literary truth is derived from the parish, and if it is truth it will be universal'.¹⁵ While 'literary' fiction and non-fiction are in many respects defined by their distance from 'commercial' literature, regional literature is defined by its relationship to a different set of factors, and it is these

that must be considered if regional publishing houses are going to continue to be viable in this age of increasing consolidation and globalisation of publishing operations.

V. Conclusion

In July 2007, Fremantle Arts Centre Press changed its name to Fremantle Press. The name change is part of a restructuring process mandated by the Western Australian Government—including upgraded financial reporting, a sound business plan, and a one-off grant of \$300,000 and interest-free loan in the amount of \$265,000—in light of the Press's recent difficulties paying authors' royalties and printers. The Press has had its premises outside the Fremantle Arts Centre since 1990, so perhaps the name change was overdue. At the same time, Fremantle Arts Centre Press changed its by-line from 'Australia's finest small publisher' to the more modest 'fine independent publishing'. This retreat from the bold claim that has marked the company since shortly after its inception 31 years ago, parallels the recent history of Fremantle Arts Centre Press and provides a neat metaphor for the rise and more contemporary fall of regional literature and publishing from the favour of both the literary and general public.

Fremantle Arts Centre Press has had a much larger impact (however such a thing is measured) on the national and even international scene than the other two Western Australian publishing houses mentioned. Magabala Books being an Indigenous publisher complicates the argument about regional presses, as does UWA Press being a university press. However, it is this very diversity that is most intriguing about the Western Australian publishing scene. Within this diversity, then, the sites at which these publishers experience commonalities form a compelling case for the shared experiences of regional publishers in other parts of the world. These sites, derived from their common experiences of operating outside the major publishing centres, can be fleshed

out and fashioned into a publishing plan for the future, one that through the very diversity it represents is sure to develop and extend minds and cultures.

NOTES

¹ Bruce Bennett, 'Concepts of "the West" in Canadian and Australian Literary Studies', *Westerly*, No. 29, 2 (1984), p. 81.

² David Headon, ed., *North of the Ten Commandments: A Collection of Northern Territory Literature* (Sydney: Hodder & Stoughton, 1991), p. xix.

³ Thomas Shapcott, *The Literature Board: A Brief History* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1988), p. 8.

⁴ Laurie Hergenhan, 'The Struggles of the Little Magazines', *Quadrant*, No. 47, 7-8 (2003), p. 85.

⁵ Crena Fitzgerald, *A Press in Isolation: University of Western Australia Press, 1935-2004* (Crawley: UWA Press, 2005).

⁶ Fremantle Press, 'About Fremantle Press', Fremantle Press, <http://www.fremantlepress.com.au> (accessed June 13, 2007).

⁷ Ian Irvine, 'The Truth About Publishing', Ian Irvine, <http://www.ian-irvine.com> (accessed October 30, 2006).

⁸ Anita M. Heiss, ed., *Dhuuluu-Yala (To Talk Straight): Publishing Indigenous Literature* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2003), p. 51.

⁹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Book Publishers, 2003-04* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005), p. 3.

¹⁰ Australian Bureau of Statistics, p. 6.

¹¹ Michelle Grossman, letter to the author, March 12, 2007.

¹² Mark Davis, 'The Decline of the Literary Paradigm in Australian Publishing', *Heat*, No. 12 (2006), pp. 91-108.

¹³ Nathan Hollier, 'Diagnosing the Death of Literature', *Wet Ink*, No. 6 (2007), p. 13.

¹⁴ Ray Coffey, letter to the author, June 18, 2007.

¹⁵ Thea Astley, 'Being a Queenslander: A Form of Literary and Geographical Conceit', *Southerly*, No. 36, 3 (1976), p. 255.