

Europe in the South

Antarctica in Fiction: Imaginative Narratives of the Far South

By Elizabeth Leane

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Old Songs in the Timeless Land: Medievalism in Australian Literature, 1840-1910.

By Louise D'Arcens

UWA Press, 216 pp, 2011

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Reviewed by Nicholas Birns

ELIZABETH LEANE'S *ANTARCTICA IN FICTION* AND LOUISE D'ARCENS *OLD SONGS IN THE Timeless Land* have in common the theme of European cultural impact or influence in the extreme ends of the geographical south. Indeed, the continent that is now named Australia is so named because Europeans, looking for an inhabited south pole, instead found an uninhabited Antarctica and an inhabited Great Southern Land far to the west of the pole itself. That Antarctica was not inhabited by humans was less important for the colonialist project than that it was not inhabited by non-whites and thus enabled what Leane describes as 'the re-casting of white racial prejudices' (106). Such popular Antarcticist phenomena such as the sudden popularity, in the late 1990s, of anything to do with the early twentieth-century expeditions of Sir Ernest Shackleton must be said to have retained elements of this imaginary: it was about courage and leadership and even environmentalism, but also whiteness. Antarctica may embody a forbidding, imperturbable vacancy but, as Elizabeth Leane says with regard to the ending of Edgar Allan Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), those writers who have responded to it unfold an 'intense blackness replaced by pure whiteness' (102). Leane's book, covering a time-frame from the late eighteenth century until now and focusing on hundreds of fictional works in English and other languages, provides an able survey of the way images of Antarctica have been culturally framed.

In 2013, the nations making claims to Antarctic territory are those with majority-white populations: Chile, Argentina, Australia, and New Zealand. These, the four

countries closest to Antarctica, have obvious claims. But Britain, France and the United States still claim Antarctic territory, and these claims still matter to the two Anglophone nations, the UK manifestly in its South Atlantic territories, the US latently. Leane also draws attention to US involvement in the Antarctic region. She argues that the US's politically neutral stance during the Falkland Islands dispute stems from a sense that the US historically had a stake in Antarctic regions, a stake that harks back to Silas Duncan and Wilkes' Exploring Expedition to the Antarctic as an extension of US manifest destiny. Leane notes that had Herman Melville been slightly older and gone to sea 'during the height of the Antarctic sealing boom' (45), maybe the Great American Novel would concern an Antarctic seal and not a Pacific whale. Conversely, though, those countries that do exist in close geographical proximity to the Antarctic do not always embrace this proximity. Leane relates an epiphany from the Chilean novelist Ariel Dorfman's *The Nanny and the Iceberg* (2003) where the protagonist, a refugee from the Pinochet dictatorship, realises that the vacant Antarctic images he sees on the television screen are in fact part of his own politically troubled nation, pertaining to, as Leane puts it, Chile's 'sovereignty claims and technological capabilities' (48).

Leane writes from Tasmania, itself a far southern land with a history of violence against, and near-obliteration of, its Indigenous peoples, and her work can in a very extended sense be seen as part of the far field of antipodean studies. *Antarctica in Fiction* is a model of what thematic criticism can do, that is bring together a cross-section of heterogeneous texts in order to show how a particular theme or subject turns and develops in imaginative ways. After the linguistic turn, and after the development of deconstruction and the New Historicism, cogent thematic work is emerging in this age of, for lack of a better term, New Empiricism. Leane excels at brief readings of multiple texts about the Antarctic that give both a good sense of the book and a sense of their importance to 'Antarctica' literature. The contemporary black British playwright, Mojisola Adebayo, one of the few to 'rewrite Antarctic history from a non-white perspective' (105) is shown to present an anti-colonial, queer, and non-anthropocentric Antarctica. More canonical works, like James Fenimore Cooper's *The Sea Lions* (1849), are also well limned, as Leane describes its promise of spiritual 'purification and rejuvenation' (138).

Leane deftly draws attention to various generic approaches in her chosen Antarctica texts. Nikki Gemmell's *Shiver* (1997) is an example of that unlikely mode, the 'Antarctic realist' text (136). In Gemmell's novel, trips to Antarctica cause a narrative protagonist to reconsider and straighten out her life. Indeed what is surprising is that so much of the fictional texts about the Antarctic that Leane has so thoroughly and assiduously studied and drawn on refer to other texts. Yes, the representations of Antarctic exploration in a text such as Tom

Stoppard's *Jumpers* (1972), not primarily concerned with it thematically, are used as a trope. Yes, there is a flourishing tradition of US Antarctic fantasy stemming from Poe and Cooper and seen more recently in John Calvin Batchelor's *Birth of the People's Republic of Antarctica* (1983), intriguing but tacitly neoconservative, and Kim Stanley Robinson's *Antarctica* (1997), leftist in a 'utopian' (49) if methodical and responsible way. But most Antarctic fiction tends to be about the experience of actually being there; the exoticism of the icy continent demands a visceral realism in response. Perhaps one day there will be a mode whereby the terror and sublimity of the Antarctic can be evoked—as might even be heralded by Poe himself—without the burden of racism.

Leane describes how Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000) 'deploys so many narrative patterns' (182) of previous Antarctic fiction. Though Leane exonerates Chabon—perhaps on grounds of diplomatic immunity—of the charge of perpetrating 'an incongruous mélange of clichés', the twenty-first century literary Antarctic must be different from that represented in works of past writers. Ecological crisis in the Antarctic region has meant that, via news and other media sources, the continent figures more prominently in a wider imaginary. As Leane mentions in her introduction, the fact that it is becoming easier for writers and academics to visit Antarctica means that, even if Antarctica remains remote, it will become less a purely exotic and strange land and more of a place that is uncannily familiar.

If Leane's book chronicles literary encounters through which writers come to terms with the idea of the uninhabited, D'Arcens' book shows the intertwining of two histories of habitation: the representation of Australia as (in European terms) a 'timeless land' (whereby millennia of Indigenous habitation was ignored) and the medieval past of Europe. The subject of D'Arcens' book is Australia's fictive engagement with the medieval in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries' (18) and it is outstandingly pursued. Thus far, postcolonial studies work has been characterized by a meliorism and presentism that has tended to occlude the complex rhetorical approaches of pre-twentieth century Australian writing. Those interested in a post-colonial approach—one concerned with power and domination in many different ages and contexts and that is not just monolithically tethered to the *Verwindung* of British political hegemony—will find D'Arcens' subject pivotal. Importantly, Australian medievalism is not simply about performances or transplantations of European culture to Australia, as instanced in the University of Sydney's famous motto, '*Sidere mens, eadem mutato*'. Rather, it is a scheme in which Australia, in its exoticism, reminds settlers of the *European* exoticism of the Middle Ages, an era, in historiographic terms, untamed, othered, abjected.

The perhaps most obvious Australian medievalist path might be an exploration of those outcasts and convicts who identified with the (post-1066) subordinated Anglo-Saxon rather than the Norman aristocracy. D’Arcens’ book makes clear, however, that late nineteenth-century Australians identified with a synthesis of Saxon and Norman, recognizing that England’s cultural inheritance was too heterogeneous for one strand to be unduly privileged. Yet, compared with the US at this time—as illuminated in books such as Kim Ileen Moreland’s *The Medievalist Impulse in American Literature* (1996)—Australians evinced what might be said to be a slight partiality to the Saxons, as opposed to the mania for the achievements of the Normans among such US writers as Sarah Orne Jewett and Henry Adams, who saw themselves as those over the yoke, not under it. Indeed, there are three basic stances. One is a simple, rousing Anglo-Saxon chauvinism that would see the past oppression of the Saxons as only justifying later English hegemony. The other—epitomised for D’Arcens by Rolf Boldrewood—uses the Saxon precedent to fuel a revisionary Australian nationalism. The third, a sceptical modernism, replete with an almost Joycean sense of the futility of history and historical precedent, is represented by Joseph Furphy, who as a literary figure stands as much between Joyce and Mark Twain (whose devastating critique of Sir Walter Scott’s influence on the US South is cited perspicaciously by D’Arcens) as anyone possibly can. Furphy doubts that history on its own can bring comfort or sanction to the present. In this, he was generally in tune with the rest of the *Bulletin* writers, who, whatever their rousing nationalism, wanted a modern freedom, not a postulated reincarnation of an ancient one. Only William Lane—whose utopian socialism and intransigent racism caused him to abandon the Australian cultural project entirely for a chimerical white working class paradise in Paraguay—tried to combine Anglo-Saxonism with modern-day teleologies. If Lane wanted to escape the presence of Indigenous people, though, he went to the wrong place! D’Arcens makes clear throughout that medievalism engaged with the history of the Australian continent through its exploration of a primal past, although D’Arcens does not indict medievalism for this any more than any mode of white Australian representation could be indicted.

Old Songs in a Timeless Land illuminates hidden corners of the Australian cultural landscape. Readers (especially Australian literary scholars) may be familiar with the John Woolley Building, the home of the English Department at the University of Sydney; D’Arcens not only gives us valuable information about Woolley but shows him as a promulgator of an official, Anglophile Australian medievalism which poets like Henry Kendall resisted. The New Norcia monastery near Perth is seen by D’Arcens as at once nostalgic for the fount of Benedictine monasticism and as forward-looking in the very inclusion of ‘New’, suggesting ‘continuity but also ... rupture’ (10). Importantly, though D’Arcens notes racist or essentialist aspects of Australian medievalism, she is not out to pathologise it. Indeed, a

signifier such as 'New Norcia' is seen as a healthy and characteristically Australian way of stepping beyond the past without rejecting it, which could pertain to other cultural legacies as well.

In an introduction and five chapters, D'Arcens covers the major genres of late nineteenth-century Australian cultural production. Like Leane, she surveys hundreds of different texts and analyses them in terms of an overall thematic frame rather than providing close, formal readings of individual works. Her final chapter, on the dramatic burlesque, thoroughly amasses a cluster of very heterogeneous materials and shows how drama, with its oral elements and its appeal to the popular, was the form that promulgated medievalism to the widest number of Australians. Her chapter on women writers—featuring especially Tasma, Ada Cambridge, and Rosa Praed—sees their principle tie to medievalism as emerging through aestheticism, engendering a material medievalism that expressed itself through the decorative arts and the art and illustration of the pre-Raphaelites and William Morris. D'Arcens' chapters on poetry show how Adam Lindsay Gordon's medievalism is no longer seen as retrograde but as testifying to the multitude, of cultural histories that can be redeployed in an Australian context. In writing about the European past, both Gordon and Victor Daley are also writing about Australia.

D'Arcens' book is written with exceptional poise and grace. She genuinely directs her work to a 'mixed audience' (20) of Australianists and medievalists and, in addition, writes in a way historians will find comprehensible and congenial. *Old Songs in a Timeless Land* is not simply a monograph, nor a magisterial tome. Nor is it a souped-down entertainment trying to reach a general audience. It is a rich book of literary and cultural criticism that should be a central text in Australian literary studies for its portrayal of Australian literature as 'restoring and preserving ... mutating and destroying the medieval past' (197).

Old Songs in a Timeless Land uses medievalism to show how European Australia really is. It also demonstrates how writers, in deploying this heritage, exhibited a creative difference that, at its most interesting, goes far beyond simply replicating Europe as the far-southern avatar of the global North.

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