ESSAY: ED WRIGHT ON THE LITERATURE OF NEWCASTLE

Fictions of Newcastle: Dusky Red With Industry

Australia's second oldest city. Its first industrial city. Now the seventh largest city in the country. The world's busiest coal port. A Lonely Planet top ten city to visit. Newcastle: the capital of the Hunter Region. It's a place where market researchers go to discover what middle Australia thinks.

People have long arrived in Newcastle seeking to improve their lot. Others have felt they needed to escape Newcastle in order to express their talent to the world. Increasingly now it's a city to which artists, priced out of the capital cities, decamp. Newcastle, in fact, has the highest proportion of visual artists per capita of anywhere in Australia. The performing arts have a rich history here and there has long been a strong local community-oriented arts scene. It's hard to reconcile this with the popular image of the city as a tough working class town, a place of petrol heads, hard rock and heavy drinking. Newcastle: where in 1979 a riot broke out at the Star Hotel in response to Tooth's decision to shut down the pub. Four thousand people rocked up, cars were torched and the footage was beamed around the world. Cold Chisel

wrote a song about it.

The literary history of Newcastle – and especially the representation of Newcastle and its immediate surrounds in fiction, is somewhat thinner. From some intriguing early representations of Newcastle in its condition as a penal colony, there is a large gap until the second world war. Then, curiously, in a city whose dominant images for many is masculine; of men working in the steelworks, and the tough macho working class culture that emanated from it, there are three significant twentieth-century novels set in Newcastle, all of them written by women: Dymphna Cusack, Elizabeth Harrower and Marion Halligan.

In 1999 the BHP Steelworks closed, forcing Newcastle to reinvent itself. The tensions around this period are explored directly in Patrick Cullen's *What Came Between* and more obliquely in Michael Sala's *The Last Thread.* As Newcastle changes, the literary ecosystem of the city grows. This growth is occurring against the backdrop of broader publishing conditions where it's never been easier to publish a book – but increasingly more difficult to make a living as a writer.

If the literature of Newcastle is sparse, there's even less critical literature on the literary representation of Newcastle. One useful introduction, however, is Julian Croft's article, *A Sense of Industrial Place – The Literature of Newcastle, New South Wales, 1797-1997.* Croft is a poet, English professor and novelist who grew up in the Newcastle suburb of Merewether; his novel *Out of Print* is also set in Newcastle. He identifies the poetry of convict Frank McNamara, who borrowed from William Blake in his evocation of the harsh traditions of the initial Hunter River settlement, as the first to provide a literary representation of the place. Until 1823 Newcastle was a closed military settlement and a punishment detail for the convicts who were sent there. The settlement was also the setting for parts of one of Australia's first novels, James Tucker's *Memoirs of Ralph Rashleigh* (1844), a fictional autobiography in the vein of *For the Term of His Natural Life*, which although it wasn't published until 1929, was in its creation a contemporary of Australia's first novel, *Quintus Servinton: A Tale founded upon Incidents of Real Occurrence*, written by convicted forger, Henry Savery, and published in Hobart in 1830.

This earliest fictional depiction of Newcastle is uninviting. Having been sent there as punishment for consorting with bushrangers, Rashleigh finds himself first down a coal mine, then sent to the lime-burners camp at Stockton for further punishment.

> *Next morning, in fulfilment of his sentence, Rashleigh was stripped naked, except that he was allowed to wear part of his shirt as a decency shield, and was loaded with another pair of leg-irons in addition to those which had manacled him since his arrival at Newcastle. He was placed on board a lime punt, in charge of a constable, and transferred to the north shore of the Coal River, a sterile and forbidding tract made up of hummocks of sand scantily patched with couch grass and stunted bushes. The naked misery of the lime-burners was even more extreme than that of the miners, on whose side of the river the barrenness was at least relieved by one or two gardens.*

> *The lime-burners' camp consisted of two lines of hovels, enclosed by a tall palisade made of strips of the outer coat of the cabbage palm. The convicts here were the exiles and outcasts of the criminals from whose ranks they derived, only the weak, the vicious and the untameable being sent here from the horrors of Newcastle. As Rashleigh arrived they were busily employed loading boats with marine shells, which were burned, but not slaked, for making lime. This loading was done by means of baskets which were filled and carried through the surf on the convicts' backs to the boats, into which the shells were tipped.*

The sense of industrial place which Croft identifies in his essay is already present here. Newcastle starts as a prison camp, but unlike many of the other early European settlements in Australia, it is a productive one – the economic potential of Newcastle was identified from the earliest sighting of the stripes of coal in its coastal cliffs. This situation lasted until 1823 when the convicts were shipped further up the coast to Port Macquarie and free settlers began to populate the Newcastle area. It should also be noted that the first dictionary of an Aboriginal language following the British invasion appeared in Newcastle in these years; the Reverend Lancelot Threlkeld's 1827 work, *Specimens of a Dialect of the Aborigines of New South Wales; Being the first attempt to form their speech into a written language.* This volume documented the language of the Awabakal people, who remain a vital part of contemporary Newcastle's culture in an immediate way that is arguably not possible in a larger city.

Croft found few literary depictions of Newcastle – with the exception of some (but not a lot of) poetry – until the second world war. Novocastrians, he writes,

> *must have been too busy making money or enjoying their slowly growing prosperity to spend much time writing. After the first flush of convict writing, life in a port of mining village seems not to have provoked the muse, apart from satires on local issues, or laboured celebrations of national events.*

Why did no one write about Newcastle? Croft could be right to assert that the organic communities formed around coal mines and the port were sufficiently prosperous and self-involved as to be uninterested in their literary representation in the broader world. If you were interested in that kind of thing, the idea perhaps already existed that it would be necessary to leave Newcastle to find it. No Emily Dickinsons or Jane Austens have been discovered to have been scribbling away in private in Newcastle. Indeed Australian writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries seem on the whole to have been a fairly peripatetic lot. While Newcastle East Public School, founded in 1816 as a school for convict children taught by a convict, Henry Wrensford, is the oldest existing school in Australia, with work to be had in the mines, the port and in the agricultural regions surrounding the settlement, then later in the factories, education was not always a necessity let alone a priority.

The enjoyment of literature demands a higher level of education than most other art forms. A town long identified as working class may well have been less interested than other places in the novel, which is arguably the most bourgeois of

all the major art forms. Interest in the novel rose in tandem with the forces of empire and industrialisation, forces which abstracted relations between people. Increasingly readers came to live in places where they no longer knew everyone and their place on the hierarchy of social relations. And although Newcastle embodied both these forces, as an industrial city composed of migrants, as Croft observes, the city began as a series of discrete villages and this preserved something of an older familiarity based on the inherited proximity of generations. Even now, as Newcastle has grown to accommodate over 400,000 people, the social fabric still feels layered. It's the country town sense that you can live in a place for 20 years, and call it home, without ever being fully acknowledged as a local.

Those who did read tended to read books that were published elsewhere. According to Martyn Lyons, in his introduction to *Paper Empires: A History of the Book in Australia*, by the end of the second world war, only 15% of the books bought in Australia were written by Australians. Furthermore, the concentration of publishing houses in the big cities militated against the selection of material from smaller cities. Sydney and Melbourne were outposts of empire prone to imitation of the great publishing metropolis of London (and in the second half of the twentieth century, New York) and this must have skewed the commissioning habits of local editors, who probably also wanted to impress their English superiors with representations of what was obviously unique about Australia, the outback.

Mid-century Newcastle

Why should a city famous for its industry produce a literature predominantly written by women with limited access to the identifying characteristic of the culture? In the second half of the twentieth century, there were three notable novels set in Newcastle: Dymphna Cusack's *Southern Steel* (1953); Elizabeth Harrower's *The Long Prospect* (1958) and Marion Halligan's *Lovers' Knots: A Hundred Year Novel* (1992). A reading of them reveals considerable antipathy towards or avoidance of the industrial. Only Cusack, whose novel is fuelled by the Marxist politics of social realism and its longing for an industrial proletariat to incubate revolution, offers a celebration of the working class culture for which Newcastle is renowned.

Southern Steel, set during the second world war, also does the best job of capturing the nature of Newcastle as an industrial city. The novel is organised around the Sweetapple family and the destiny of three brothers: Keir, Rud and Landy. Each occupies a different position in the industrial economy. Keir has studied hard, married a socially ambitious woman, Roz, and having become a metallurgist is climbing the corporate ladder at Southern Steel. He is estranged from his brother, Rud, who works as a union organiser and is a communist. While Keir accepts the necessity of organised labour and the existence of unions, the perspective of his own life trajectory cannot accept that the individual is not the agent of their own destiny. Their younger brother, Landy, is happy go lucky and works on the ships that deliver the steel to both other Australian ports and overseas.

Cusack, who was born in the NSW country town of West Wyalong, but who worked for some time in Newcastle as a school teacher, clearly relishes Newcastle as a setting. As Keir (also known as Bar) arrives home in a seaplane at the beginning of the novel we are treated to an enthusiastic aerial sketch of the city.

> *Seeing the whole city spread out before him, he was filled with a sense of exaltation: the harbour sparkling between the winding shores of the estuary, its waters streaked with the purplish line of the river, the twin arms of Nobbys and Stockton enclosing it like the pincers of a giant crab; the huddle of buildings along the waterfront; the scatter of suburbs, thinning out between coast and timbered heights; the innumerable factory chimneys, and, towering above them all, sign and seal of Newcastle's existence, the smoke-stacks of Southern Steel and Broken Hill Proprietary under their perpetual silver-black clouds.*

The steelworks is not figured as the enemy of the city's natural beauty, more as an energising presence that enhances it. In *Southern Steel*, we get to see inside the blast furnaces of the steelworks and meet the people who work there and the risks they take. On one visit Keir is informed that a man has been burnt by molten steel and taken to hospital. From a contemporary point of view his acceptance of this seems almost callous. However, the context of the second world war is vital; young men were dying in large numbers on a regular basis. Many men in Newcastle were deemed to belong to Essential Industries and therefore spared the ordeal of fighting in the war.

Cusack also takes us aboard Landy's coal ships to provide a sense of the camaraderie of men at sea. In some senses it's a romantic view of the working class: freed from the routine of work, home, work, home, work, the men talk tough with each other and fight to pass the time. When under pressure, however, their bonds of union are strong. Of the three brothers it is Rud who features the least. Yet his actions and beliefs as a union activist pervade the book, particularly as a counterpoint to Keir.

Southern Steel is in many ways a tragic novel. The fate of Landy, victim of a Japanese submarine's attack on his ship, is the most obvious example; however it is the more subtle tragedy of Keir's upward social mobility that Cusack invests her interest in. On the surface of it, he is the epitome of success, a flash house on the Hill, the most prestigious suburb of Newcastle, a great job, and a wife, Roz, who is adept at the social game. However, by the end of the novel, he finds that his wife has successfully estranged him from his own family and son in her pursuit of her own social elevation, which is dependent upon her husband's performance at work. Her social ambition becomes a kind of psychological prison for Keir. Deprived of emotional succour, he falls into an affair with the beautiful Myee Maven, who listens to him but doesn't love him. She is merely too lonely to go without physical affection until her husband returns from the war.

Given the clear interest Cusack shows in the industry that drives the city, the *Sydney Morning Herald* review of *Southern Steel* upon its first publication is somewhat surprising.

> *Strangely enough, despite an air of toughness in the account of many of its episodes, this is a type of novel that many readers quickly come to recognise as a 'woman's book.' The term is used in a derogatory sense; and it means, of course, not necessarily a book written by a woman but a book with irritating defects of a kind that quite a large number of women readers especially seem to tolerate and even enjoy. In* Southern Steel *there is an underlying sentimentality, a pausing on non-significant details of domesticity, a shapelessness of structure, an animated discursiveness like the monologue of a long-winded telephone-caller.*

Of the three major novels set in Newcastle, *Southern Steel* is the only one that really makes an effort to represent industry, which makes this criticism even odder. Intriguingly, Cusack set her novel in the war, which was a time when some of the rigid demarcations in gender roles were loosened as manufacturing industries turned to women to supply labour while men were away fighting in the war. *Southern Steel* doesn't explicitly explore this, yet in the portrait of Landy's wife-to-be, Anne, there's a sense of a generation of women emerging into adulthood with an enhanced idea of their independence. To a contemporary reader, the review is absurd in its patriarchal assumptions of aesthetic quality. Certainly the novelist appears in a far better retrospective light than her critic.

The avoidance of the industrial in Australian literature is not confined to Newcastle. With the exception of David Ireland's *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* and *The Glass Canoe* the industrial aspects of Australian culture have been relatively unexplored by its literature. There are no great novels of life in a car factory in the northern suburbs of Melbourne or Adelaide, or in the soap factory of Sydney's Balmain, or the former ICI chemical plant at Botany Bay, or indeed the coalmines of the Hunter Valley. These feats of organisation have largely been ignored by our literature – and perhaps our failure to adequately imagine these places is a reason why Australia has largely let its manufacturing industries go. The bush, in contrast, has been comprehensively represented, and has become a mythic component of our culture, even though we are the most urbanised population of any country in the world. The lives of urban professionals and indeed the lives of the underclasses, both urban and rural have a body of literature exploring their conditions. However, for a country, which was once a world leader in establishing fair conditions for its workers, there has been little corresponding interest in representing how work works on the page.

Published five years after *Southern Steel*, and recently exhumed from relative obscurity by Text Publishing as part of its Text Classics series, Elizabeth Harrower's *The Long Prospect* is set in the fictional city of Ballowra, an industrial place that is recognisable from its steelworks, sprawl and location to the north of Sydney as Newcastle, where Harrower lived until the age of 12 , before moving to Sydney, a trajectory paralleled by *The Long Prospect*'s 12 year-old protagonist Emily. Emily lives with her grandmother, Lilian, the proprietress of a boarding house, who in a tradition of widowed landladies that reaches back as far at least as Chaucer isn't exactly proper. Her mother Paula has decamped to Sydney

where she lives on the half-share of a hat shop Lilian has bought her, while her father Harry has been transferred to the country town of Coolong by his employer, a bank.

In contrast to the enthusiastic aerial evocation of Newcastle that opens *Southern Steel*, Harrower portrays Ballowra in terms of its perceived limitations. The book opens with a description of Lilian visiting her ex-lodger Thea in a flat, perhaps inspired by some of Newcastle's art deco buildings, such as Segenhoe by the renowned architect Emil Sodersten, that look from The Hill over the city's commercial centre and harbour to the north and to the ocean to the east.

> *The front door of Thea's flat was ajar so Lilian gave it a push and went in, her eyes on swivels. This was the first time she had been there but Thea's name was printed on a card next to the bell so there could be no mistake about it, any more than about the building , which on its cliffside road, was hardly more to be expected there, and hardly less conspicuous than a transplanted Sphinx.*
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> *To Ballowra, for Ballowra, the building and the choice of the building as a dwelling place, seemed pretentious. Since its birth Ballowra had been – you might say on principle – low-lying single storied: in everything , that is, but steel works and factories.*

Where Lilian lives is far from the sea.

> *In Greenhills, the most western suburb of Ballowra, farthest from the coast, for her house on the side of a hill, Lilian could see three provision shops on the opposite corner, two roads at right angles, hundreds of corrugated iron rooftops, and smoke from acres of steelworks.*

Cultural distinction maps onto the landscape. Firstly there is the idea that class and money hug the coast in Australian cities, almost as if to be closer to the *real* culture across the oceans. However, the flats are a new intrusion into the landscape, a marker of imported parvenu values and from Lilian's perspective unwarranted social disruption: house trumps flat, but coast trumps the western suburb.

> *Thea had known Lilian Hulm and lived in her house for eleven years . . . In those days there were no flats; a moat of steelworks and factories surrounded hills and plains of drab bungalows and shops. Cinemas, hotels, reared up from the encircled plain like small cathedrals. At night the sky glowed dusky red with industry.*

Harrower's delineation of Ballowra's space helps build the central tension of the novel: the cringe from the insinuation of external influences by the citizens of Ballowra, and the cringe of those few sensitive, artistic souls who, forced to live among this, are at perennial risk of having their spirits annihilated by it.

Lilian features in the novel as an amoral success story who by the age of 47 has turned two dead husbands into a row of houses, three taxis, and a half share in a hat shop. Yet while she might not meet the moral requirements to be considered an upstanding citizen, she is still an active and effective enforcer of the cultural norms that have made possible her success, and nowhere more so than in her management of her granddaughter by sarcasm.

In contrast to the varied masculine agency expressed through the trio of brothers in *Southern Steel*, the men of *The Long Prospect* are treated with contempt by Lilian and her friends. The action of the novel takes place almost entirely inside the house, with the curtains being drawn on the frequent expeditions into town, mainly for parties. Men are a kind of unavoidable phenomena around which the women of the novel arrange their lives. The industries, around which the economy of the city is organised, are largely erased from the novel's view, a perspective that is reinforced by the fact that Emily, who the novel invests with superior quality, is a 12-year old girl on the cusp of adulthood yet with little autonomy over her life.

The adult female characters in the novel hold strong views about the men around them. Lilian, responding to her daughter Paula's assertion that she hates all men, does not agree:

> *As far as men were concerned, no one would more willingly admit that they were faulty – aggressive, rough, thoughtless. And Paula had, beginning with her father and ending with Harry Lawrence, come up against some weird specimens … Still! What did it matter?*
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> *To Lilian who had competed with and excelled them in most of their faults, and who knew how to baffle and reduce them in particularly feminine way as well, it all added to the zest. No she could certainly not agree. Pursing her mouth as she listened, she wished that Paula could see the immense possibilities for amusement in the situation. It was alright to hate men – any woman in her right mind did – but if you had any spirit at all you had to battle with them, and belittle them, and learn to enjoy it.*

This low opinion of men is not just filtered through Lilian's point of view. Describing the leisure of a Saturday for instance, Harrower writes:

> *The older men were dour, with a look of uncharitable hardness about their eyes. Self-enclosed, past the age when living itself is sufficient incentive to go on living, with atrophied capacities for thinking or feeling, they worked grimly towards old age and death. Their wives flirted with the tradesmen, looked for lovers, and their children feared them. Preparing for a picnic or a dance they would be silent suddenly at the entry of their father into the room. Was he drunk? What would he say?*
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> *This attitude of humourless endurance, natural to a few, had been imposed on most by parents like themselves, surroundings of monotonous ugliness, participation in wars the young could not*

> *remember, and by a brief education delivered with so little relevance to circumstance and ability as to be incomprehensible.*

Partly this language constitutes a kind of literary convention, a romantic trope that negatively figures the industrial worker as a drone. But it is still a judgment on the culture. Working men are collectively denied inner lives in this novel. There are shades here of Robin Boyd's 1960 tome *The Australian Ugliness* which depicted the battle between Australia's bourgeois and bogan cultures and their incompatible aspirations. Harrower expresses, whether intentionally or not, not just the rigidity of the gender relations in a town like Ballowra, traces of which still persist in the culture of Newcastle today, but also this desire of educated middle class sensitivities, and by extension people of creativity and taste, to insulate themselves from the working class. Lilian's position further speaks to the tension between the social distinction acquired by wealth and that through education and the acquisition of cultural capital, something that the novel as an art form with a bourgeois core has always been interested in.

The above description is filtered through Harry's impressions when he returns to Ballowra from Coolong to awkwardly resume the duties of fatherhood.

> *Recalling the healthy, weather-beaten faces of Coolong, the clear, tremendous sky that arched the miles of open country, Harry felt he knew where was the better place to be.*

The bush is superior to the industrial city, not just for aesthetic reasons, but because it produces a superior kind of man. Paradoxically it was in 1950s London, still suffering the after-effects of the war, that Harrower wrote *The Long Prospect*, which was her second novel. Perhaps it was homesickness, not for the suburbs of Newcastle, which Harrower detested, but for the light and openness of Australia that provoked this expression of preference for the Australian countryside. In contrast to Cusack, Harrower figures the industrial town as a reductive place where a rich existence is almost impossible.

A place to escape

The Long Prospect figures Ballowra (Newcastle) as a place to escape. Max and his ex-girlfriend Thea, also a former resident of Lilian's boarding house, are privileged by the novel as the intelligent outsiders – so eventually they must leave. Even the meek daughter Paula despatched to the hat shop in Sydney has no intention of return. For Emily, ostracised at school by her odd family circumstances, Ballowra is an ordeal inseparable from that of childhood. She is primed for escape by the educational ambitions incited in her by Max; namely the dream of going to university, a dream her family will dismiss as unnecessary nonsense.

When Harrower was writing *The Long Prospect*, the dream of university education was barely possible without escaping

from Newcastle. While limited university study commenced in Newcastle in 1951 with the establishment of the Newcastle University College as a campus of what is now the University of New South Wales, it wasn't until 1965 that the University of Newcastle itself was established and it took some years before it offered a full breadth of degrees. In the era before free education was instituted by the Whitlam government, leaving Newcastle for an education was something not everyone could afford to do. Even today many people who attend the University of Newcastle, where I occasionally teach, are the first person in their family to go to university.

Still, the desire of young people to leave their homes and explore the world, or to take advantage of the opportunities the metropolis has to offer is an old one that persists today. From a Novocastrian perspective this can be seen in the pages of the author John Hughes, whose memoir *The Idea of Home* deftly captures this moment of leaving. Hughes grew up in Cessnock, about 40 minutes west of Newcastle, an area defined by coalmining and wine. His mother was Ukrainian – her parents had arrived into the nearby Greta Migrant Camp during the war. His father was a miner of Welsh heritage. Hughes went to university in Newcastle. But for him, it was a staging post on the voyage to somewhere else:

> *Towards the end of my third year at Newcastle University my restlessness became overwhelming. I'd taken all the University had to offer. Newcastle was far enough away from Cessnock to require a move out of home, yet close enough to allow weekend returns, or Saturday afternoons at the movies with my grandfather. I was the first one on either side of the family to go to university, and although not quite of the same order as going to Mars, it was still exotic enough to necessitate a certain anxiety that only proximity and regular contact might assuage. Newcastle was the largest city in the state outside of Sydney, the provincial capital, a harbour city and alchemist to the region's mineral wealth, but by the end of three years it was beginning to look a little small to me, like another Cessnock with a few more shops.*

This is a happier scenario than that experienced by *The Long Prospect*'s Emily, too young to make her own decisions. While Hughes makes his exit via a fellowship to Cambridge (a smaller town than Newcastle), Emily moves to Sydney and into an apartment with her unconvincingly reunited parents.

The urge to escape Newcastle and find culture can also be found in the memoir-essay, 'Transistor' by Mark Mordue, Hughes's university contemporary who, like Emily, finds himself living in Newcastle with his grandmother while his parents are elsewhere making a living. It's not the demi-monde of the boarding house but the respectable suburbia of New Lambton where Mordue's dreams of being elsewhere begin, lying in bed listening to 2JJ on his transistor radio at night. His dream is catalysed by the live music scene of the late 70s and early 80s and the knowledge that Sydney, less than three hours away by train, is the place to find it. Mordue's dream of the ungentrified inner city of Sydney as a place of possibility and self-reinvention is one that was shared by young people for decades, whether from the polite suburbs of the North Shore, from regional towns like Newcastle or Coffs Harbour or Dubbo, or even from the smaller capital cities of other states. People moved to Sydney and stayed in share houses in Surry Hills, Glebe, Newtown, Balmain or

Bondi where they developed networks of friends and artistic or professional opportunities in an environment that at least pretended to erase origins as part of its bohemian ethos, and where culture, and particularly the music scene, provided new means of establishing social capital and status. This scene was often more interesting to many artists and writers than exploring the nuances of the places they had left.

When he finishes his degree at Newcastle University Mordue packs his belongings in a van and heads to Sydney, a place that he has already invented in his imagination. He makes the salient point that he feels sorry for people from places like Sydney because they are already there – in an important way they don't have to dream for their arrival, that the dream of elsewhere is a vital moment in the formation of the creative imagination.

In the concluding paragraphs to the essay he writes:

> *… Newcastle is or was a small-enough big-enough place to make us close and yet let us imagine other* selves *that have since gone out from the provinces and into the lifeblood of the capital. For all the changes, I never feel Newcastle people are strangers, more that they are allies – and even those that are really strangers are somehow familiar deep inside.*
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> *I think this goes down into something about Newcastle as a working town, and with that working town mentality a sense that you should never get too big for your boots. The flipside of that are the close-minded small-minded inhibitions that step on anyone who is odd or artistic – one reason why we all had to escape. Though I fancy the big spaces of Newcastle drive us to fill out something in ourselves we never could have done in Sydney. We really are a part of some secret society – Novocastrians – and I get a kick out of that and even feel sorry for people born in Sydney, as if they were somehow born without dreams and songs to take them somewhere else and then to send them back home."*

Mordue's conclusion is prescient as returning to Newcastle is what many people are doing. Since the property boom of the late 1990s, which continues largely unabated, inner city Sydney has become too gentrified and expensive for many pursuing a creative existence. There are many consequences for the ecology of Australian literature – and one of them is the flight to the regions, from Melbourne to Castlemaine, for instance, or from Sydney to the Blue Mountains, or indeed to Newcastle. Of course it is not just creative people, who are looking to return or escape to places like Newcastle. Young families, for instance, are attracted to the fact that cheaper housing makes it possible to spend more time together. The current inner-city apartment boom in Newcastle is partly fuelled by demand from well-off retirees attracted to the seaside lifestyle, health facilities, burgeoning culture and ease of getting around. The growth of Newcastle and places like it is not a specific bohemian event in the way the colonisation of the inner suburbs of the capital cities was in the 60s, 70s and 80s. But it is a movement of people seeking lifestyles that the bigger cities no longer offer.

The Novocastrian Renaissance

Since Mordue's departure, Newcastle has grown and changed. Following the earthquake of 1989 and the closing of the BHP Steelworks ten years after, Newcastle has been forced to reinvent itself and has done so in interesting ways through organisations such as ReNew Newcastle, which has turned a blighted city centre into a thriving eclectic space, albeit one that is probably just entering the tertiary moment of its bohemian sweet spot.

The literary culture, following a national trend towards the performative aspects of literature, has benefited from the National Young Writers Festival, which draws young people from around Australia every October long weekend, and the more recently established Newcastle Writers Festival. Newcastle's poetry scene is thriving too. The recently published *A Slow Combusting Hymn* edited by Kit Kelen and Jean Kent is a superb anthology of poetry from and about Newcastle and the Hunter Region. As an indication of the innovative strategies writers often take to make a living while continuing to pursue their art, the anthology was published in Macau, where Kelen teaches part of the year. Two regular monthly poetry readings, Word Hurl Anti-Slam and Poetry in the Pub are in Newcastle itself and there are others in the region.

There is a Hunter Writers Centre, several great independent bookshops such as McLeans in Hamilton, the Press Book House and Cooks Hill Books as well as Berkelouw-linked Harry Hartog in Kotara, and an excellent library with multiple branches. The university has produced creative writing graduates who are getting published and winning prizes, while independent creative writing school, The Creative Word Shop is also bringing writers to successful publication as well providing creative writing workshops for children, as does Unload.

There are a number of excellent small publishers, such as Hunter Press, Catchfire Press and Exisle Press who are publishing books by local authors. Some of these books such as Mark Maclean's *A Year Down the Drain*, a memoir of tracing the Styx, a drily named creek turned concreted drain that runs into Newcastle Harbour, are excellent examples of a literature of place, for which the readership is primarily local.

All the necessary infrastructure is in place for a flourishing literary culture – except perhaps for enough of the jobs that writers, who according to David Throsby's latest investigation of arts economics earn on average $12,900 from their work, need to subsidise their literary activity. Still, Newcastle is a regional centre better placed than most to provide writers with the *slashie* income. Furthermore, the internet has radically changed the production and dissemination of culture and this has also affected the relationship of the regional to the metropolitan. It is far easier now to live regionally and participate in the economic opportunities of the metropolitan, especially for those who work with the written word. This is particularly the case with Newcastle, because Sydney is only two hours away, putting it in easy reach if not for the daily commute, for occasional face-to-face meetings that facilitate work relationships.

Counterbalancing the amenity of this growing literary ecosystem, is how moving to Newcastle opens you up in other unexpected ways. Because it is smaller you tend to get to know a greater variety of people. In the big cities it's very easy to specialise, to become part of a literary coterie or social world, an in group that usually originates in university days, and expands through the imbricated social world of early career and pre-family days, whose values are shared and then worn, conversationally or otherwise, as recognisable badges of identity. There are advantages to that life, but it's a life lived in skew. When you 're living that kind of life, it's easy to assume you're at the centre of something, to over-estimate the importance of literary culture in the broader world. Moving to Newcastle from that world is a move towards the periphery. At times it feels like wilful insignificance. You lose gravity.

It takes a while, but something grows in this vacuum created by the loss of metropolitan status. The busyness of big cities tends to turn people into phenomena, there are so many we encounter. Newcastle, a city roughly one-tenth the size of Sydney, is small enough so that the components of society tend to be experienced in the actual instead of the abstract, especially compared to Sydney with its geographical stratification. Something like slow(er) time infuses the textures of everyday interactions. The pace of living in a city a tenth the size of Sydney teaches someone like myself, who has been obsessed with literature since my early teens, of the rich complexity of lives and characters to be found outside the community of the book. Where people once came to Sydney from places like Newcastle and smaller to find the world of the book, in Newcastle you find the book's place in the world, a discovery whose emotional resonances include fear and release. Moving to Newcastle is partly a stripping away of the assumptions of accumulated cultural capital. Some of that capital capital loses its relevance here. The process isn't always comfortable, some of these assumptions are embarrassing to realise in oneself, and it's also difficult to let go of things you've worked towards. But in this ability to let go is also the possibility of freedom.

Possibly this is all another kind of skew, but the interplay of skews has always been a useful way for writers to calibrate their ideas of reality.

Newcastle Literature since the 1990s

The new Newcastle is yet to be seen in literature. However, some excellent recent fiction has been written in Newcastle and the surrounds such as Courtney Collins' *The Burial*, Todd Alexander's *Tom Houghton* and Wendy James's *The Lost Girls*. Julian Croft's *Out of Print* (2014), a novel that represents Newcastle's history in the post second world war era, reprises some of the Sweetapple characters from Cusack's *Southern Steel*.

Marion Halligan's *Lovers' Knots*, which spans from the Great Depression to the late twentieth century and is primarily set in Newcastle is a brilliant exploration of the enormous changes in Australian society and Newcastle of the period between the 1930s and 1980s and how successive generations of the one family shaped themselves into them. Halligan,

who grew up in the Newcastle suburb of Merewether but has spent much of her adult life in Canberra, uses these cities as the primary settings for the book. It's a beautifully observed novel, a kind of family saga that meanders across generations with no clear plot and was a deserved winner of the 1992 Age Book of the Year Award.

Ada and Albert Gray, having lost their first child to pneumonia in the cold moist air of England, emigrate to Newcastle when their second son George develops problem in his lungs and they are advised by their doctor to seek warmer climes or risk losing another child. For Ada, 'a strong-minded woman … Newcastle seemed a place of possibilities, and since there was no going back there was much to be made the best of.' Here we get a sense of Newcastle not as a place to escape from but as a retreat, an opinion that is vindicated for Ada by the outbreak of the second world war.

For her husband, Albert, the possibilities don't end so happily. After having secured a 'gentlemanly' job at the Mission to Seamen in Newcastle Port, he has hit the bottle and lost his job – much to his socially ambitious wife's chagrin. Now he works as a shunter in the railway yards which involves dangerous and dirty shiftwork. It's another instance of the industrial city's inadequate male, but also of the perceived importance for Ada of becoming insulated from the need to belong to the working class. Ada generalises her own circumstances into a theory.

> *Ada put men into two categories. There were the children women bore, and loved fiercely, and cosseted with all their power, which often wasn't enough. They could be wild and difficult and break their mother's hearts, could sail the seas and ignore them for years but they were doted on. And there were the men women married. These had nothing to do with sons, were feckless, hopeless, uninteresting, disappointing.*

Ada of course is hampered in her ambitions by the fecklessness of Albert, who is reduced to being a shadow in the family home, largely ignored by his wife and children. The parallels to the treatment of men in *The Long Prospect* are striking. Yet Halligan's depiction of her male characters changes through the novel. Ada's son George becomes a genial husband and father, while his daughter Veronica's partner, Mikelis, is invested with the energy of the New Australian (he is Latvian) and the artist (he is a photographer). He's an emblem of the shift in Australian society and its invigoration by migration. His presence is particularly appropriate as many European migrants came to cities like Newcastle and Wollongong, precisely because there was work available in the steelworks. As the swinging sixties begin to permeate the mainstream, Veronica chooses him over Martin, a BHP-trained engineer, whose 'future is assured'. Halligan deftly traces the generational cultural transition through the various fortunes of the Gray family. The reader begins to see how much notions of family and relations between the sexes change over the decades. Newcastle is neither glorified, nor vilified. Halligan clearly relishes in the description of it, but it is not figured as an industrial romance as it is *Southern Steel*, nor as a place of shame and ostracism as in *The Long Prospect.* What we get in *Lovers' Knots* is descriptions of the beach, something for which Newcastle is now more renowned than for the steelworks:

> *At five o'clock the beach emptied of people and the light changed. The sea mist blew in and hazed*

> *the land, the late sun shone low and it was very quiet, like walking through a nimbus. One of the things Mikelis liked to do was talk about the Baltic, to speculate on the ways it would be different from the Pacific. They walked through the dry and, dragging their feet like ploughs to see what they could turn over: old seaweed, worn shells and polished glass, occasionally a bit of coal. In the Baltic there would be amber, he said. The wind blew fresh and damp, fitting their clothes to their bodies, depositing salt on their skins and hair; Veronica would have to wash hers before she went out.*

There's a sensual delight taken in this walk down Merewether Beach. The coal and industry are peripheral, replaced by the contemplative hedonism of a walk along the sand. For Halligan, Newcastle is a place that can be left and returned to. Moreover, it is a place that contains aesthetic treasures of its own

Michael Sala's *The Last Thread*, figures arrival as a traumatic event. It's an autobiographical novel about the author's migration from Holland as a child and growing up in Newcastle in the 1980s. Written as part of a Doctorate in Creative Writing at the University of Newcastle, it was the Regional Winner (Pacific) of the 2013 Commonwealth Book Prize and also won the 2013 NSW Premier's Literary Award for New Writing. Told from the perspective of a boy, it portrays Sala's emigration with his family from the Netherlands to Newcastle. By using the point of view of a child, Sala also minimises the impact of Newcastle as an industrial city, even if the series of troubled men who enter into relations with his mother, such as his bullying stepfather are the psychological embodiment of the work they do. It's a sharply written revisitation of childhood that bear similarities to the English translations of Karl Ove Knaussgard's *My Struggle* that have been published subsequent to Sala's book.

The evocation of Newcastle occurs through a child's eyes, something *The Last Thread* shares with *The Long Prospect*. While both novels are written using third person point of view, Harrower's narrator travels between characters, while Sala filters the action entirely through his fictional self, Michaelis, curiously an echo of the photographer in *Lovers' Knots*. As for Emily in *The Long Prospect,* Michaelis's descriptions of Newcastle are saturated with his own trauma as the following account of his family's move to the dockside suburb of Carrington shows.

> *They are standing in front of their latest house, an old miner's cottage wedged between other cottages. Dirk takes his pipe from his mouth and taps the ash out against his pants. 'It doesn't take much work. Paint. Rip up the carpet. Sand and polish the boards. …*
>
> *Their street is wide enough for teams of oxen to turn around with their loads of coal, except there aren't any oxen here anymore. The miners have long since moved on, too. The coal is still nearby though, heaped up in mountains at the end of the next suburb. waiting to be loaded onto ships. The dust from the coal is on the fence when you run your finger across it.*
>
> *At one end of the broad road, there is saltbush. Beyond the bushes, the ground loses itself in*

> *mounds of dirt and rubble. Past that is the restless expanse of the harbour, seeping and receding through a mess of mangroves near the shore, roots littered with plastic bags, bottles, syringes, fragments of pornographic magazines, a mattress, the murky water lapping from this to the decaying old warehouses on the other side."*

The scene is an aggregation of dilapidation, the consequences of a traumatised treasure hunt for remembered negative detail. For Michaelis it can only get worse:

> *'And you can walk to school,' Mum says.*
>
> *Through waves of heat, Michaelis can make out the latest school and he has seen it close up already: a stretch of asphalt hemmed in by a wire fence, brick buildings with drab pain peeling form the window frames and the doors, all of it full of menace, even when its empty. Weathered steel monkey bars, graffiti over the bike shed and toilets, the stall of bubblers, half with twigs stuffed into the holes. The grass on the fields looks dead. All burnt at the tips and faded, straggling in clumps from the dusty earth.*

The description here is unrelenting. Formally lyrical, emotionally miserable, there is no place for the irruption of any kind of joy. For the young Sala, Newcastle is a place that is irrevocably stained by the traumatic familial circumstances of his upbringing.

Patrick Cullen's *What Came Between* has a more nuanced perspective on Newcastle as a place. It's a series of twelve interlinked short stories that focuses on the fortunes of three couples who live in neighbouring terraces in Laman Street in the now almost completely gentrified inner city Newcastle suburb of Cooks Hill, where steelworkers once co-habited with artists and young people seeking cheap accommodation. Cooks Hill was one of the suburbs most affected by the 1989 earthquake. The 'between' in the title refers to the period between the earthquake and the closing of the BHP steelworks in 1999. The structure of the book (like Sala's it was the creative component of a Doctorate in Creative Arts at the University of Newcastle) provides an inter-generational perspective, but one, unlike Halligan's that is fixed in a single strand of time. Ray and Pam are edging towards retirement, but the threatened closure of the BHP Steelworks might put a spanner in the works. When a friend of theirs commits suicide in response to the closure, they are forced to examine their own relationship and their prospects for the future. The presence of the steel works and its effects upon the environment are accepted fatalistically, as they were by Novocastrians for almost a century.

> *The rain broke early. The sun pitched into the narrow courtyard behind the terrace and Pam went out, put the basket down beneath the clothes line and ran her hand along the length of each of the dripping wires. A greasy film of rain-soaked dust coated her fingers. She rubbed her hands together and it worked its way into the creases of her palm.*

> *The dust came from the steelworks, drifting day and night to settle on the city. Pam had been living with it from the day she and Ray had moved in from the suburbs, but it still got to her – and although she wouldn't admit it to Ray – she'd even started to hope that there was some truth in the talk of closure.*
>
> *… She'd only once complained to him about the dust and he'd told her that it would always be there and that she'd just have to put up with it. 'That's what we so over there,' he'd said. 'We make steel and we make dust.'*

Cullen is less willing to subscribe to the trope of the emotionally empty working class drone. These are stories of people who struggle with themselves and the conditions inflicted upon them. Ray makes amends with his estranged son, for instance, a story that shows both the jeopardy and delicacy of relations between men. The hard scrabble of marriage is portrayed in the second couple, Paul and Sarah's marriage struggles, with breakdowns, with trying to have a baby and illness, with coming to the end of endurance for their professional career, teaching and nursing. Meanwhile Lucas and Cate, young lovers who are living in his grandmother's home come to terms with an unsuspected pregnancy. In these stories Cullen savours in Newcastle: its dignity and gritty ethos and the spirit of community that is the by-product of having been an industrial city. Yet in keeping with the liminal notion foregrounded in the title's use of 'between', the grit and dust of waning industry is counterpointed by the psychological refreshment of the ocean, of surfing and also of the emergence of cultural venues such as art galleries in Cooks Hill. It captures the sense of an emergent bohemia on the cusp of a golden moment that is as temporary in its trajectory towards gentrification as the dirty industrialism it replaces.

Paradoxically since the closure of BHP, Newcastle has prospered. There are large employers, including manufacturers, and the port of the Newcastle is the world's busiest coal port. Of course this provokes a crucial tension. The prosperity brought by the coal is contemporaneous with the emergence of Newcastle as a lifestyle destination. Renew Newcastle founder Marcus Westbury in his excellent *Creating Cities* identifies Newcastle as a place where it's possible to try things out and fail. Ideas don't necessarily have to be scalable here in order to survive. The beaches, the artists, the small business innovators, the sense of community, are all things that buck the neo-liberal ethos of contemporary Australia. And here in Newcastle these forces for a creativity that often exists outside economic motivations are more than just window dressing for the big economic forces of coal and property development.

The balance of culture and economy makes for a peculiar dance. It's impossible to ignore the grace and size of the coal ships as they enter through the narrow aperture of the harbour with an escort of tugboats, and almost glide their way through to the terminal. The coal loader on Kooragang Island at night is a wonderland of lights. Coal is intrinsic to the cultural fabric of Newcastle and has been since the city's earliest European days. Yet it also means pollution, and the dissemination of pollution; the dust that blackens clothes on the Hills Hoists of Newcastle suburbs such as Tighes Hill has a material relationship to the dangerous air of cities in Asia such as Beijing and the consequences of climate change which are already beginning to be felt.

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