

Recollecting Australian Studies at the University of Florence

Gaetano Prampolini

Università degli Studi di Firenze (<gaetano.prampolini@unifi.it>)

The story goes on... and nobody could be happier about it than I, who was instrumental in getting it under way.

Its setting out was the effect of two concurring factors. When, in the late 1970s, young and less young Italian academics in the field of Anglophone literatures were widening the scope of their scholarly interests through the discovery of the Canadian and the Australian ones, I, an Americanist by calling, took to the latter, thanks to Bernard Hickey, who was then teaching at the University of Venice and whose enthusiastic and enthusiasm-raising campaigning fostered the introduction of Australian Studies in several other Italian universities as well. The other factor was a fortunate chance without which Australian Studies might never have started at the University of Florence: in 1984, Marie-Christine Hubert, an Australian specialist of Australian literature who had graduated from the University of Sydney and was a *ricercatrice* at the Gabriele D'Annunzio University of Pescara, moved to Tuscany and was allowed to transfer her position. The statutes of our Faculty of Arts, though, made no provision for the teaching of Anglophone literatures other than the English and the American, and the only way to have Australian matters taught was to smuggle them, so to say, into the syllabus of American literature, which I had been teaching there for over ten years.

As one of its optional seminar courses, Australian literature had an instant as well as a steady success. From the tradition of women writers to Aboriginal writing, from The Nineties to regionalism, from the literature of expatriation to the contemporary short story, so wide was the spectrum of significant aspects dealt with by Hubert, whom I spelled during her leaves of absence only. The attendance averaged twenty to thirty students a year, and quite a number of them chose Australian literature topics for their *laurea* dissertations. What I found important and particularly stimulating for the students as well as myself was the possibility of a comparative approach to two of the major “newer” literatures in English, the American and the Australian.

The highlight for Australian Studies at the University of Florence was the conference, “An Antipodean Connection. Australian Writers, Artists

and Travellers in Tuscany”, that took place in January 1989. With the warm encouragement and multi-faceted cooperation of the Australian Embassy in Rome, the city and the regional governments, the prestigious Gabinetto Vieusseux, and the indispensable financial aid from two Italian banks, we were able to set up a two-day event, meant to be a tribute to Australia’s Bicentenary from an Italian city and region which had been and continue to be among the most favourite destinations for Australians. The conference format we conceived gave the floor exclusively to Australian speakers and, for once, less of it to academics and more to writers and artists, as we deemed the latter to generally be the most perceptive and articulate of the travellers. The speeches delivered by Janine Burke, William Grono, Shirley Hazzard, David Malouf, Desmond O’Grady, and Peter Porter are gathered along with the other papers in the volume of the proceedings. Several writers who had been invited were unable to attend for various reasons. I remember letters full of regret from Rosemary Dobson, Judith Rodriguez, and Thomas Shapcott as I do the one from Germaine Greer, who, in declining our invitation, remarked that we could have spent our monies in more enlightened ways. While choosing not to be one of the speakers, Jeffrey Smart honoured the opening session of the conference with his presence, probably as amazed as everybody else to see the Sala dei Dugento at Palazzo Vecchio crammed full with students, Italian university professors interested in things Australian and many, many Australians, passers-through and residents who came from every corner of Tuscany. Two exhibitions rounded off our programme, that of Jamie Boyd’s paintings inspired by Tuscany at La Strozzi and that of Australian books at Palazzo Vecchio.

In 1995, as a result of a revision of the Faculty statutes, Australian Literature was at last accorded an independent status under the denomination “Letterature dei Paesi di Lingua Inglese” and its teaching confirmed to Hubert, who carried it on brilliantly – and most valiantly too, when her declining health had made her an invalid.

After Christine’s untimely death in 2006, to prevent her legacy from getting lost, I started devoting part of my teaching time to one course in Australian literature. Although well received by sizable and very keen classes of students, my effort was doomed to have a short life. Two years later, in fact, one of the several more or less misguided corrections made to the previous big overhaul of the Italian university system (which, in turn, had produced few, if any, beneficial effects on the humanities) forbade professors from teaching anything outside the official boundaries of their professorships (American Literature, in my case).

That put an end to the teaching of Australian literature at the University of Florence. Happily, however, the story goes on, and in a most exciting and promising way, as is witnessed by the section of the forthcoming issue of the

journal of the Department of Languages, Literatures and Intercultural Studies, *LEA*, which presents five valuable essays on as many aspects of Australian culture in their respective relations with either the Italian culture or other wider contexts.

Their authors are, or have been, all connected in various capacities with Monash University, whose Centre in Prato stands out, his founder and first director, Professor Bill Kent, pointed out in 2008, as “the largest Australian institution of its sort not only in Italy but in Europe”. I am proud to have taken part myself in its multiform and multi-layered activities, albeit on a small scale, as a part-time teacher of Monash undergraduates and, in 2010, by reading a paper at a lively conference on translation.

