The Wheatbelt: A Literary History  
An Overview of the Project  

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The historical background to this project is the dramatic transformation of the south-west corner of the Australian continent during the course of the twentieth century. In the space of several decades, in an arc from Esperance to Geraldton, an area of land larger than England was cleared of native flora for the farming of grain and livestock. In the shires and districts that make up the wheatbelt, only 7% of the original vegetation remains. The project aims to track, within the creative literature (stories, plays, poems, memoirs and novels) of those who have lived in the wheatbelt, the affective investments and aspirations that drove this radical transformation. The key writers in this study are James Pollard (1900-1971), John Keith Ewers (1904-1978), Cyril E. Goode (1907-1982), Jack Davis (1914-1992), Peter Cowan (1914-2002), Dorothy Hewett (1923-2002), Elizabeth Jolley (1923-2007), Barbara York Main (1929- ) and John Kinsella (1963- ). Beyond this, there is a considerable range of writers whose careers intersect with this region, and of ephemeral creative work contained in the periodical press of the wheatbelt newspapers.

The project extends a determination found in my earlier works, especially Paper Nation (MUP, 2001), to draw on the specific qualities of literature as a creative art to inform our understanding of history and place. In the current project, the concentration is not on the formative moments of Australian nationhood, but on the working out of the historical forces that shape the landscape we inhabit. The Western Australian wheatbelt is a region that represents, I wish to argue, a field of relations between social and natural environments that records in its present condition the events of the previous century. It is in the creative writing of the wheatbelt that we are able to view the particular manner by which these relations have transpired. This claim for the centrality of creative writing to historical understanding rests on the recognition that a dimension of experience is opened when a person decides to write imaginatively. That dimension of experience is reflective of the emotional investments that govern action but remain largely undeclared in public life, and often too, unrealised even in the acting subject. By pursuing a history according to this premise, this study substantially advances a number of linked fields of research, most particularly the study of Australian literature in regional terms and the pursuit of literary regionalism internationally.

Whilst the project is regional in its focus—a great many Western Australians have intimate links with the wheatbelt through work, childhood, or relatives—the wheatbelt is also a prime case-study of the worldwide agricultural colonisation of temperate range and wood-land for granular cultivation (Meinig 1962). Recent historical scholarship goes further, claiming that the pattern of events that saw the emergence of the Western Australian wheatbelt should properly be regarded as a spectacular late front in a “settler revolution” that transformed the globe between the late 18th and the mid-20th century, comparable in reach and significance with the industrial revolution which enabled it (Belich 2009; Veracini 2010). The wheatbelt must also be prominent in any study of “comparative Wests”, in which “the west” is loaded with connotative associations by the exemplary history of the United States (White 1991). The popular designation of rural Western Australia as the “Golden West” united both the goldfields and the “golden grain” in its invocation of a prosperous frontier. Here, as in
America, the “west” functions as an avatar for an idealised future based on pioneering families living “close to the land” and exemplifying simple virtues in a world felt to be ever more complex.

This project constitutes the first major consideration of Western Australian literature since the sesquicentenary history, *The Literature of Western Australia* (Bennett, ed., 1979), which documented the production and preoccupations of literature between 1829 and 1979. Creative writing since then, as well as major shifts in the field of literary studies, have thus only been partially captured in the criticism of particular authors or in the course of wider thematic, generic or historical considerations (e.g. the Cambridge/Oxford histories and companions). This project aims at commencing the process of updating the picture of Western Australian writing, by reconceptualising the field in regional terms.

The conception of the proposed project has been influenced by recent trends in the discipline of literary study, particularly the renewed interest in the relationship between literature and region. Internationally, an impetus towards this has been the influential literary geography of Franco Moretti, particularly his *Atlas of the European Novel* (1998). In Australia, CA Cranston and Robert Zeller’s edited collection, *The Littoral Zone: Australian Contexts and their Writers* (2007), also prioritises the location of writing in (bio)regional contexts. An exploratory essay on the literature of the wheatbelt appears in this volume (Hughes-d’Aeth 2007). Cranston and Zeller’s book was also the first full-length publication to exemplify the emerging field of eco-criticism in Australian literary studies. The most recent literary history of an Australian state, *By the Book: A Literary History of Queensland* (UQP 2007), edited by Patrick Buckridge and Belinda McKay, is also distinctive for its organisation of the essays into regions (South-East, Central, Western, Northern) of Queensland, which enables the literature to take on its primary associations at this level. This book drew on the significant research in regional Queensland literature, particularly in the work of Cheryl Taylor and the journal *LiNQ (Literature in North Queensland)*, as well as ventures like *Coppertales*, a journal of rural arts, based at USQ in Toowoomba.

A term that usefully encapsulates this methodological trend is critical regionalism, first made prominent in an Australian context by Bruce Bennett, who is also the leading authority on Western Australian literature. Critical regionalism brings literature and place into an analytical relation, and responds to challenges that beset the nation as a horizon of meaning. The matter of regionalism was given sustained attention in Philip Mead’s essay, “Nation, Literature, Location”, included in *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature* (2009):

Much work in contemporary literary studies is an attempt to understand and articulate the complexities of imaginary places, locales, districts and regions of literary texts and their recursive relations to the multifaceted experience of actual, lived places. (551)

It is within the framework of such “recursive relations”, between the imaginary places of creative writing and their correlates in the world, that the literary history of the wheatbelt is being undertaken.

In the light of this, the study proposed has four main intentions.

- To re-evaluate a sector of Western Australian creative writing, that of the wheatbelt, in such a way as to shed new light on some of the nation’s key writers (Cowan, Hewett, Davis, Kinsella).
• To provide a basis, and working example, for the conduct of a completed literary history of Western Australia in regional terms (South Coast, Kimberley, Pilbara, Goldfields).
• To produce a synthesised socio-ecological history of the wheatbelt derived from the creative writing of its inhabitants.
• To introduce a new best practice into the study of literature and place capable of being transposed nationally and internationally.

The project employs a division into periods through which it hopes to render, as closely as possible, the manner by which the wheatbelt unfolded historically. Whilst the physical borders are given, with surprising exactitude, by the land enclosed between the 400 and 250 ml rainfall lines, the temporal borders require some decisions to be made about when the wheatbelt begins and what events mark fundamental changes in its manner of being organised (historical periods). The following periods have been proposed:

• 1889-1914: A Fortunate Life
• 1914-1929: For Heroes to Live In
• 1929-1945: Windmill Country
• 1945-1979: Twice Trodden Ground
• 1979-2010: Postmodern Ceres

The wheatbelt commences with the opening of the Agricultural Area of Meckering in 1889. The formalisation of close settlement was accomplished in the following decade by the passing of the Land Act of 1898. This Act owed its basic shape to the land legislation passed for selecting rural properties in New South Wales and Victoria in the 1860s, and for that matter the legislation culminating in the Homestead Act (1862) in the United States. The reason for the distinct lag was quite simply that until the gold-rushes of the 1890s quadrupled its population, Western Australia had neither the funds nor the manpower to attempt mass close-settlement, even though this had been the dream since the inception of the colony in 1829. There is thus, in the terms of this project, no wheatbelt literature possible before 1889. In actual fact, there is very little Western Australian creative writing prior to this point, remembering that the population of the entire colony totalled 35 000 in 1885. Perhaps for similar reasons there has been, to date, very little creative writing found from the early period of the wheatbelt (1889-1918), although there is certainly later work which recollects these years. Albert Facey’s A Fortunate Life (1981), detailing the life of his family in the newly opened districts of Pingelly in 1902, is the most widely known example. The initial settlement of the wheatbelt, however, did not take place in a literary vacuum, if one considers the broader national picture. In particular, the turn of the century marked a shift in the poetic focus of magazines like the Bulletin away from the pastoral industry (stockman, drovers, shearers), which had formed the staple iconography of the 1880s and 90s, and toward a renewed appreciation of crop-farming. A representative poem by A.B. “Banjo” Paterson chimes that “the bush bard, changing his tune, may strive / To sing the song of Wheat!” (1914). In Paterson’s native NSW, the area under wheat production grew from 1 million to 3.5 million acres between 1901 and 1914. Crop farming, which had prior to this been seen as a form of drudgery, became closely associated with the work of nation-building. The revaluation of cropping was seen in the naming of the drought resistant strain of wheat developed by Farrer—which helped dramatically extend the range of wheat-growing in
Australia—“Federation Wheat”. A literature of the “selector” was famously to emerge in the work of Steele Rudd (1868-1935), whose sketch “Starting Our Selection” published in the Bulletin in 1895, documented the experience of his father’s selection of land at Emu Creek in Queensland. The book On Our Selection followed in 1902 and its many sequels, a film of that name from 1920, and the serialisations for radio as Dad and Dave, from the 1930s to the 1950s locked the experience into cultural memory. In Victoria, John Shaw Neilson’s poetry gave expression to the experiences of a rural farm worker in the Mallee district in the early decades of the twentieth century, and the posthumous publication of his memoirs (1978) revealed in detail the life of itinerant rural work he led.

The commencement of hostilities in 1914 depopulated the wheatbelt of young men, but with the armistice of 1918, the survivors returned and were joined by an influx of returned soldiers who were to enjoy a post-war boom in commodity prices. As well as solving an unemployment problem and turning land to agricultural use, the scheme was imagined to be restorative through putting veterans back into direct contact with the land. Katharine Susannah Prichard’s husband Hugo Throssell was one of these, and several of Prichard’s early stories are set during the period they spent establishing a new wheat farm after the War. The 1920s saw the publication of the first wheatbelt novels. James Pollard (1900-71) published The Bushland Man (1926), Rose of the Bushlands (1927) and Bushland Vagabonds (1928), which depict the life of the emerging wheat farms of Western Australia. A victim of gassing in World War One, Pollard followed the path of many returned serviceman into a life of wheat farming, obtaining land through the Soldier Settlement Scheme. Pollard was also the author of a nature column (‘Denizens of the Bush’ 1923-37) for the West Australian newspaper, as well as writing many stories and sketches for rural schoolchildren (Hughes-d’Aeth 2011).

The catastrophe of the Depression that fell in 1929 marks the next period in the history of the wheatbelt, whose lingering effects were not dispelled until the conclusion of the Second World War in 1945. A friend of Pollard, John Keith Ewers (1904-78), published his first poems just prior to the Wall Street crash (for instance, “The Wheat Men”, Bulletin, 24 July 1927) whilst teaching at a one-teacher school in the wheatbelt hamlet of South Tammin. He drew on these experiences to produce a wheatbelt saga called “The World of Arvea Lea”, whose heroine was born in the newly formed wheatbelt around the turn of the century. The novels were written and conceived in the 1930s and the hopes of the pioneers the novel depicts are shadowed by the events to come (Hughes-d’Aeth 2007). Although planned as a tetralogy, ultimately only two novels—Men Against the Earth (1946), For Heroes to Live In (1947)—were published (a third was written but remained unpublished), after a delay caused by the Second World War. Cyril E. Goode experienced, in the Yilgarn, in the far eastern goldfield, both boom and bust. He walked off his farm in the 1930s when the wheat price collapsed. His poetry, in particular, that collected in his volumes, The Grower of Golden Grain (1932) and Wattle in the Ranges (1939), as well as his short stories, depict the experience of clearing and commencing to farm, as well as the shockwaves left by the collapse in commodity prices. In the work of Pollard, Ewers and Goode, we see the animating mythology of the wheatbelt in relatively clear expression.

The post-war years see the emergence of the most acclaimed author to address the wheatbelt, Dorothy Hewett (1923-2002). Hewett spent the first twelve years of her life on a wheat and sheep farm near Wickepin in the Great Southern and was the first prominent writer to “grow up” in the wheatbelt. In Hewett’s poetry, stories, plays and memoirs we encounter the wheatbelt, often through the eyes of a precocious child, attuned to the contradictions at the
edge of the sustaining myths of her parents and the other adults forging lives in the new wheat districts. Her earliest published poetry, written whilst still a child, appeared in *Our Rural Magazine* (1921-50), a journal started by the Western Australian Education Department, which included poems and stories by rural and correspondence students (Hughes-d’Aeth 2008, Alexander 2009). Her early adult poetry spans the years 1940 to 1946 (Grono 1995), and features the first clear version of a mythic wheatbelt (in the poem “Testament”, which won the ABC Poetry prize in 1945), that would become an obsessive theme and setting in her productive later years. The 1940s also saw the publication of Peter Cowan’s seminal collection of short fiction, *Drift* (1946), whose particular brand of quietism introduced a meditative, modernist register to a regional poetics that had thus far been dominated by ballads and sagas. Cowan’s continuing interest in the wheatbelt was seen in his next major works, the collection *The Unploughed Land* (1958) and the novel, *Summer* (1964)

In 1967 Barbara York Main’s *Between Wodjil and Tor* was published, which for the first time described the wheatbelt as an eco-system and introduced to a Western Australian context the profound sense of environmental fragility heralded by Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962). York Main remembers reading Hewett’s poems whilst herself a correspondence student growing up at Bungulla siding near the wheatbelt town of Kellerberrin. Though one can trace a disquiet with the effects of habitat loss in Pollard, Ewers, Goode and Cowan, it was only in the late 60s that this took on the coordinates of modern environmentalism. Perversely, the late 60s also saw the last massive land clearance, in the sandplain country near Esperance, and marked the high-water mark in the population of the wheatbelt, which swelled with higher prices after World War Two but then diminished as economies of scale and ever greater mechanisation took hold. In the late 60s, the poetry of Jack Davis, who lived in the wheatbelt town of Brookton, as well as spending time at the Moore River Native Settlement, spoke into the great silence that had surrounded the treatment and place of Aboriginal people in the wheatbelt. His first volume of poetry, *The First Born* (1970), and his first play *The Dreamers* (first performed in 1973), fundamentally altered the manner in which the wheatbelt could be articulated. Thereafter, the presence of Aboriginal people could no longer be discursively denied.

The 1960s also saw Dorothy Hewett’s writing career resume after the long hiatus between “Testament” in 1945 and *Bobbin’ Up* in 1958. Hewett’s musical play, *The Man from Mukinupin* (1979), captured in an absurdist register, the fundamental misalignments between the hopes people had invested in the wheatbelt and the realistic possibilities it could offer. Elizabeth Jolley’s *Foxybaby* (1985), *The Well* (1986), and a number of her short stories also imbue the wheatbelt with an existential menace that belies the placid, settled quality of the land. Tom Flood (Hewett’s son) mobilised a similar uncanny doubling in his magical realist novel *Oceana Fine* (1988) set in the eastern wheatbelt where he had worked for a period on the wheatbins. In a more urgent vein, the wheatbelt’s current laureate, John Kinsella (1963-), has brought the wheatbelt into the era of postmodernity. In Kinsella’s prolific poetry, the fractured ecology stands in for a more radical fracture in meaning itself. Other prominent writers who have contributed to the literature of the wheatbelt are Henrietta Drake-Brockman (1901-68), Gavin Casey (1907-64), Kim Scott (1957- ), and the poets Glen Phillips (1936- ) and Caroline Caddy (1944- ).

The picture that emerges, then, is of five periods commencing in 1889 and separated at the years 1914, 1929, 1945 and 1979. Each of these periods poses slightly different methodological challenges. As mentioned, initial research has not yielded very much
creative writing from the early period (1889-1914). Further research is required, however, into the periodical press of this time, which hosted poetry, stories and written sketches. In particular, there is a need to comprehensively review *The Western Mail* (1885-1955) and the regional papers, especially Western Australia’s first country newspaper, *The Eastern Districts Chronicle* (1877-1926; 1926-1959 as *York Chronicle*), and *The Great Southern Herald*, published from Katanning since 1901. Other periodical sources need to be reviewed, from other wheatbelt districts, and also from the goldfields papers, which tended to service eastern wheatbelt districts like the Yilgarn and Southern Cross. It is this element of the project that synchronises with the LIEF-funded Austlit enhancement. In the period 1914 to 1945, books emerge, in particular the novels of Pollard and the poetry and stories of Cyril E. Goode. M.V. Peacock’s novel, *The Mildmays of the Wheatbelt* (1941), documents the life of a city girl sent to a wheatbelt farm during the Depression. This period also sees the appearance of a rich source of juvenile literature, for and by children, in the pages of *Our Rural Magazine* (1926-1951) and in the anthology *Brave Young Singers* (1938), drawn from its pages. A detailed review of this school paper is also required.

The post-war periods (1945-79; 1979-present) involve adjustments to the methodology to reflect the movement of creative writing, and what might be called the culture of letters, away from newspapers and popular magazines and toward “little magazines”, including *Westerly*. This move reflected, in turn, the transit of the profession of criticism from the popular press to universities. Later still, the establishment of Fremantle Arts Centre Press in 1976 (Fremantle Press since 2008) offered significant new opportunities for local writers. FACP published Elizabeth Jolley’s early works, Kim Scott’s novels, as well as many of John Kinsella’s volumes and the later works of Dorothy Hewett. There are thus more monographs from this period. From the late 1960s, one needs also to acknowledge a much more prominent critical literature, with the advent of academic criticism of Western Australian writing that culminated in *The Literature of Western Australia* (Bennett, ed., 1979) and a number of historical anthologies (Choate and Main, eds., 1979; Grono 1988; Cowan 1988) as well as a bibliography covering the period until 1990 (Bennett et al., 1990). Since the mid-90s the effect of the internet has been felt in the integration of Western Australian bibliographical scholarship into the Austlit project.

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