



ISSN 2754-5547

<https://doi.org/10.52230/CDZS3895>

## **‘My Improbable Career’**

**Tony Hughes-d’Aeth**

**To cite this article:** Tony Hughes-d’Aeth, ‘My Improbable Career’, *Journal of Australian, Canadian, and Aotearoa New Zealand Studies* 6 (September 2026): 102-106, <https://doi.org/10.52230/QIBQ3462>

CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

## My Improbable Career

Tony Hughes-d'Aeth<sup>1</sup>

When I was appointed to the Chair in Australian Literature at the University of Western Australia in July 2020 there was more than the usual interest. This was because it had recently been announced that the same position at the University of Sydney was being dissolved. The Sydney Chair had been created in 1962 and held most recently by Elizabeth Webby and Robert Dixon.

Both Webby and Dixon were examiners of my doctoral thesis in 1999. Their work on nineteenth-century Australian literature and culture had served as an inspiration and a guide to me while I researched my obscure topic on the other side of the continent. During my Ph.D., which began in 1995, the internet was invented and email had arrived to loosen the grip of isolation in Perth.

When I started my university studies in the 1990s, I had pointedly avoided Australian literature. My eyes were elsewhere. I wanted to study European and American writers, to feel at first hand the great works that lit up the literary firmament. I wanted *Madame Bovary* and *Middlemarch*. I wanted the grandeur of *Moby Dick* and the maddening exactitude of Emily Dickinson.

But in my honours year, while writing my dissertation on Walt Whitman, I found myself studying two modules in Australian literature, one on 'modernism and postmodernism' and another on 'Aboriginal Writing in English'. This introduced me to Christina Stead, Patrick White, David Malouf, Peter Carey, and to the plays of Jack

---

<sup>1</sup> I am extremely grateful to the Editor-in-chief of the journal, Dr. Jatinder Mann for his helpful comments and suggestions.

Davis and poetry of Oodgeroo. Something turned in me and I have never really looked back.

I started my doctorate wanting to write on popular Australian literature in the nineteenth century. This was then something of a dark continent. In the analogue era, before large-scale digitisation, these works were hard to find and access, often buried in periodicals. I spent many hours ruining my eyes scrolling forlornly through microfilm. In those days, bibliographers like H. M. Green and E. M. Miller were a crucial guide.

As I started to gather a stable of suitable authors to use as case studies, I noticed that several of them had contributed to a publication called the *Picturesque Atlas of Australasia*. This was a large-format three-volume historical encyclopedia that was published between 1886 and 1888 to celebrate the centenary of the British colonisation of Australia. I decided that for my Ph.D. I would write a cultural history of the *Picturesque Atlas*, one which tried to understand how it was conceived, authored, drawn, printed, and distributed.

However, as well as these historical questions, I also wanted to interpret the *Atlas*. In this I held true to my discipline of literary studies, even as it was then under the sway of the 'new' historicism of Stephen Greenblatt and others seduced by Foucault. I was not immune. Along with new historicism, the other major influence on this era of Australian literary studies was postcolonial criticism and theory.

But these paradigms were not solving my more immediate problem, which was how to interpret an encyclopedia. Does one analyse the individual entries on towns and cities in the Australian colonies, or others on its deserts and rainforests? What was I supposed to do with that? What could I say about that? Was not it all in the end just a vast grandiloquent exercise in settler-colonial puffery?

Here I found assistance in an unexpected quarter, which was in the ‘anthropological’ history of the Pacific written by Greg Dening. Dening had, with Inga Clendinnen, evolved a new and supple mode of historical writing—sometimes called the ‘Melbourne School’—that vitalised the relationship that one could have with the ‘sources’ of history.

Something Dening wrote struck a chord with me and my travails with the *Atlas*. He said, *I like to write history about people writing history because that is when they reveal themselves*. I am not sure if these were the exact words, but it was something to that effect. It allowed me to understand what I was doing for the first time. Dening was the third examiner of my doctorate, and his short but beautiful report remains to this day one of my most treasured affirmations.

My thesis was eventually published by Melbourne University Press as *Paper Nation: The Story of the Picturesque Atlas of Australasia* in 2001. Its publication and the prizes it won helped me to get a job in the academy. This was something that seemed unlikely enough that I was on the eve of resuming my studies in law. After a short and miserable attempt at a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Sydney, I realised that I was one of those people who really needed to teach and not just research.

Back at the University of Western Australia, I spent my first few years learning how to lecture and teach. Also, while my research was in Australian literature, it turned out that this was not an especially popular stream of study. There were already several Australianists in my department, and I found myself teaching where the demand was, which was in contemporary literature and cinema. A clear split opened between my research and my teaching. But, looking around I realised that this was not after all that uncommon.

As a postgraduate student I drew sustenance from the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL), which held annual conferences and made a point of being welcoming to bewildered doctoral candidates. That was a lifeline to me then and I have remained close to ASAL all my life.

Although research took a back seat in my early years as a lecturer, gradually my next project began to materialise. It was to be a literary history of the wheatbelt of Western Australia. There was certainly no great public clamour for this to be written, and I found myself explaining to be people why this might be a productive use of my time. I said to them: *Don't you think it is strange that an area of land that was the size of England, that until very recently held the most stunning and intricate ecosystems in the world, is now largely empty?*

My main question was not *how* did this happen? My main question was how did the people who did this *feel* about it? The wheatbelt was mainly cleared in two thirty-year periods from 1900 to 1930, and 1950 to 1980. But I treated the clearance of the wheatbelt as a single socio-ecological event. The writers of the wheatbelt, and there was a surprisingly rich tradition, were witnesses to this event. The book I eventually wrote, *Like Nothing on this Earth: A Literary History of the Wheatbelt* (UWA Publishing, 2017), was based on this event-witness model.

Today, I still split my practice between teaching contemporary screen studies in units like "Narrative in the Digital Age" and "Netflixes: Cinema & Long-form Television" and research into Australian literature. I now also get to teach Australian literature to the select students who want to know more about our literary heritage and sensibility.

Being an Australianist in Australia is different to being an Australianist in another country and comes with different challenges. But we find common cause in

battling a persistent indifference to our subject. For the overseas Australianist, it is making the case that Australia has an interest that extends beyond its exoticism. In Australia, it is the cultural 'cringe' that held me back from studying Australian literature in my first years at university. This self-denigration remains a defining characteristic of our settler culture.

But the cringe can also be overstated. In recent years, I have been asked to judge several prizes including the Miles Franklin Literary Award for the best Australian novel. My wider circle of friends and family, who are usually a little perplexed by my profession and interests, are excited when they hear about the Miles Franklin. Who is going to win? Are there any good ones this year? Is the process very political? How do you decide?

The shortlisted books are eagerly purchased by an Australian reading public whose very existence is sometimes doubted. The mediascape, often scornfully philistine, is briefly excited by the winner and the story behind their success. I find hope in these moments. They remind me that behind the defensive veil of indifference there is often an unspoken hunger for meaning. My job is to try and steer this hunger away from the sugar-hit of nationalist bigotry and towards the deeper thoughts in our national existence.