

# ACCEPTED VERSION

Philip Butterss

**Legends of the nineties: Literary culture in Adelaide at the end of the nineteenth century**  
Foundational Fictions in South Australian History, 2018 / Collins, C., Sendziuk, P. (ed./s), Ch.8,  
pp.118-132

Copyright © this collection Carolyn Collins and Paul Sendziuk, 2018 Copyright in individual chapters remains with the respective authors.

## PERMISSIONS

This chapter reproduced here with permission.

28<sup>th</sup> October 2020

<http://hdl.handle.net/2440/128684>

**Legends of the Nineties:  
Literary Culture in Adelaide at the End of the Nineteenth Century**

Philip Butterss

South Australia has no place in Australian literature's greatest foundational fiction—the story about the birth of a distinctive national literature in the 1890s. When Arthur Jose was asked why he had neglected Adelaide in his memoir that was later published as *The Romantic Nineties* (1933), he replied: “what was there to neglect? Adelaide was, from the literary point of view, a dependency of Melbourne, a community of appreciative audiences, not of exhilarated writers”.<sup>1</sup> He had already dismissed Melbourne as irrelevant to the origin story he was recounting: it was “not romantic” and it was “obsessed with respectability ... of the ruling English type”.<sup>2</sup> In Jose's memoir, and in others such as George Taylor's *Those Were the Days* (1918), Australian literature was born in the bohemian literary world of Sydney during that golden decade. Later, the highly influential trio of radical nationalist accounts of Australian literature and history—Vance Palmer's *The Legend of the Nineties* (1954), A.A. Phillips's *The Australian Tradition* (1958), and Russel Ward's *The Australian Legend* (1958)—would similarly show no interest in Adelaide's literary culture at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

Yet the widespread use of the term “the Athens of the South” for Adelaide had its source in the 1890s, and South Australia's reputation for poetry and Adelaide's reputation as a city particularly interested in literature were significant among the reasons for that title. One observer with relevant expertise was William Mitchell, who took up the chair of English and Philosophy at the University of Adelaide in 1895. He arrived in his new home with high expectations, having been told in London that “Adelaide, in proportion to its population, might claim to be the most literary city in Australia”. It is impossible to assess whether that claim was correct, but Mitchell soon confirmed that there was,

---

<sup>1</sup> Arthur Jose, “The Romantic ‘Nineties. IX’”, *Brisbane Courier*, 23 July 1932, p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Jose, “The Romantic ‘Nineties. VII’”, *Brisbane Courier*, 9 July 1932, p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> Vance Palmer, *The Legend of the Nineties*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1954; A.A. Phillips, *The Australian Tradition: Studies in a Colonial Culture*, Melbourne: Cheshire, 1958; Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1958.

indeed, a “widespread interest in literature” among the 130,000 people in the city and its surrounding suburbs.<sup>4</sup> Sydney and Melbourne had many more writers and larger literary cultures, but their populations were three and three-and-a-half times larger, respectively. The long-lasting use of the phrase “the Athens of the South” had its direct origins in a speech in 1899 by Hallam Tennyson, the new governor of South Australia, though those were not his exact words. This chapter surveys Adelaide’s largely ignored literary culture in the 1890s, and examines the source of one of the city’s persistent identities.

### **“A community of appreciative audiences”**

Jose did not lay eyes on Adelaide before or during the 1890s, but he was certainly correct that it was “a community of appreciative audiences”. This is most evident in the city’s impressive network of organisations interested in literature. Since the late 1850s, there had been active groups focusing on self-education, known variously as young men’s societies, mutual improvement societies, and literary societies. The 1880s saw a substantial increase in their number and, importantly, the formation of a vigorous and well-run umbrella group, the South Australian Literary Societies’ Union, which enjoyed strong endorsement from the governor, politicians, and the university. The activities of the Union and its member organisations were broad, and included a mock parliament, debate tournaments, and talks on diverse topics of scientific, cultural and social interest. As well as offering lectures on authors, recitations of poetry, and theatrical performances, the literary societies operated as a training ground for authors by arranging writing competitions, and by publishing creative writing in the Union’s year books. Many contributors went on to publish books of verse or prose.<sup>5</sup> When Mitchell arrived in Adelaide, he was immediately struck by what he regarded as the “very large numbers of literary societies in the town”.<sup>6</sup> At the end of the decade, the Union reflected on its sixteen-year history, concluding that it had made an “indelible mark” on

---

<sup>4</sup> ‘University of Adelaide’, *Advertiser*, 19 December 1895, p. 7; [‘Appendix B. Estimated Population of the Province of South Australia and of the City of Adelaide’](#) in J.J. Pascoe (ed.), *History of Adelaide and Vicinity*, Adelaide: Hussey & Gillingham, 1901, p. 617.

<sup>5</sup> ‘General Committee Minutes’, 21 August 1883 to 3 July 1889, South Australian Literary Societies’ Union Papers, State Library of South Australia, SRG 45/1; Paul Depasquale, *A Critical History of South Australian Literature, 1836-1930*, Warradale, S.A.: Pioneer, 1978, p. 116.

<sup>6</sup> ‘University of Adelaide’, p. 7.

Adelaide's social and cultural life. With some pride, it noted that it represented 30 societies with a combined membership of 1,300 people.<sup>7</sup> A few years later, the number of member organisations would pass the previous peak of 37, which had been recorded in 1894.

Other literary groups also flourished during the nineties. One commentator has written of "the spectacular rise" of the South Australian branch of the Australasian Home-Reading Union, an organisation aimed at encouraging recreational and instructive reading. The literary societies were overwhelming masculine, although some had a sizeable proportion of 'Lady Associates', notably the Adelaide Young Men's Association.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, at the inaugural public meeting of the Australasian Home-Reading Union in April 1893, it was men who dominated the podium and the **speech-making**. Women, however, were much more visible in its operation: the first report was by the secretary, Miss Hardy, and each of the eleven 'reading circles' was led by a woman.<sup>9</sup> Most groups were studying English literature, although there was some interest in French and German literature, and one was combining a study of history and Shakespeare. By the end of 1894, the number of active circles had risen to thirty-five; however, that level of commitment would not last for long.<sup>10</sup> Other bodies with literary interests that operated during the 1890s included the Savage Club (founded in 1883), the University Shakespeare Society (founded in 1884), and the Bohemian Club (founded in 1885). The city's oldest literary organisation, the Adelaide Book Society, had been formed in 1844, and it continued to circulate reading material among a handful of the most privileged members of Adelaide society.

The formal education system, too, was fostering an interest in literature, and Mitchell was very pleased by the level of literary schooling he found on his arrival. The Education Act of 1875 had made it compulsory for children up to the age of thirteen to

---

<sup>7</sup> 'Our Literary Societies' Federation: Its Past, Present, and Future', *Literary Societies' Year Book*, 1899, pp. 5-6.

<sup>8</sup> 'General Committee Minutes', South Australian Literary Societies' Union Papers.

<sup>9</sup> 'Australasian Home-Reading Union', *Advertiser*, 25 April 1893, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> John Jenkin, 'The Australasian Home Reading Union: Spectacular Rise, Precipitous Fall', *Journal of the Historical Society of South Australia*, vol. 38, 2010, pp. 64, 70.

**Commented [PS1]:** Do you mind if we use this instead of "speechifying"?

**Commented [PB2R1]:** That's fine.

attend elementary school, and by 1892 tuition was free. For older students, there had long been an assortment of private schools, as well as governesses and tutors, and these had now been joined by state-run institutions, such as the Model School in Grote Street, public schools in Tynte Street and Sturt Street, and the Advanced School for Girls in Franklin Street. At the end of 1895, Mitchell assessed the English literature papers of several hundred students sitting public examinations and found the results “highly gratifying”.<sup>11</sup> A serious commitment to literary education is also evident in the fact that the University of Adelaide was the first Australian university to offer English literature as a course of study—from its foundation in 1874.<sup>12</sup> As well as running daytime and evening lectures for his students, in July and August 1895, Mitchell offered an extension course of six lectures for the general public, which was well-attended, in spite of its fairly specialised topic: English Literature and Philosophy from 1700 to 1750.

For a small and still relatively young city, Adelaide was well served by bookshops and libraries. As early as the end of the 1840s, Catherine Helen Spence’s sister, Mary, had been irritated by a new arrival’s surprise that she was reading books recently published in London.<sup>13</sup> By the 1890s, Adelaide bookselling institutions such as E.S. Wigg & Son (founded in 1849) and W.C. Rigby (founded in 1859) were flourishing in Rundle Street and King William Street, respectively. At the end of 1894, E.W. Cole took over the bookselling business in Rundle Street that had originally been started by another Melbourne firm, George Robertson, in 1875. Books could also be bought from an array of other outlets such as Cawthorne and Co. on Gawler Place and Frearson’s Printing House on North Terrace. A newspaper article on the reading habits of the general population in 1897 noted that Adelaide had reason to be proud of its Public Library on North Terrace, which held 40,000 volumes.<sup>14</sup> Certainly, the Depression of the 1890s meant the introduction of austerity measures: funds for book purchases were reduced from £500

---

<sup>11</sup> ‘University of Adelaide’, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Leigh Dale, *The Enchantment of English: Professing English Literatures in Australian Universities*. Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2012, p. 45.

<sup>13</sup> Catherine Helen Spence, ‘An Autobiography’, in Susan Magarey (ed.) with Barbara Wall, Mary Lyons and Maryan Beams, *Ever Yours, C.H. Spence*, Adelaide: Wakefield, 2005, p. 48.

<sup>14</sup> ‘What the People Read’, *South Australian Register*, 25 September 1897, p. 5.

a year to just £88, and half the library's gaslights were turned off to save money.<sup>15</sup> However, according to the librarian, Joseph Adams, readers continued to make good use of his institution's literary holdings, with Tennyson, Shakespeare, Twain, Dumas, Wilkie Collins, Dickens, Thackeray, and George Eliot among the most widely read. Adams observed that the bush ballads of Adam Lindsay Gordon and Banjo Paterson were the most popular Australian material, and expressed his surprise that Henry Kendall and Brunton Stephens had "very few admirers". The Adelaide Circulating Library, in the Institute Building next door, contained more than 20,000 volumes, including a great deal of popular fiction from authors such as George Macdonald, Walter Besant, Marie Corelli, and Conan Doyle. In 1897, its subscribers numbered almost 900. There were also between four and five hundred subscribers to Wigg & Son's circulating library, and the company had a policy of immediately allocating a dozen copies of any popular work for lending.<sup>16</sup> Robert Frearson's circulating library of 500 books was sold at auction in 1891.

The *Theatre Royal* in Hindley Street might have been the only venue for serious drama during the 1890s, but Adelaide was blessed to have Wybert Reeve as its manager. In addition to being competent and energetic as an administrator, he saw the theatre as a vocation, and was an actor, playwright, and Shakespearean scholar. Reeve ~~said he would have preferred to devote more than a third of each year's program to what he called "first class pieces", but he kept the *Theatre Royal* viable, mounting performances night after night throughout the decade~~ managed to keep the *Theatre Royal* viable with performances night after night throughout the decade, devoting about a third of each year's program to what he called "first class pieces". Reeve delivered lectures to the University Shakespeare Society and wrote articles for its journal. His other contributions to theatre included adapting literary works, such as his friend, Wilkie Collins's, *The Woman in White*, and the Australian novelist, Rosa Praed's, *Policy and Passion*.<sup>17</sup> The *Theatre Royal* was on the regular touring circuit, and Reeve brought the best overseas and Australian performances to Adelaide. Undoubtedly the most

**Commented [PS3]:** Why 'but'? – the second half of the sentence doesn't seem to negate the first. Can you please rephrase? (I think I know what you're getting at - he put on populist performances to draw a crowd and subsidise the "1<sup>st</sup> class pieces" he really wanted to show? - but this meaning isn't conveyed in the current phrasing.

<sup>15</sup> Carl Bridge, *A Trunk Full of Books: History of the State Library of South Australia and Its Forerunners*, Adelaide: Wakefield, 1986, p. 72.

<sup>16</sup> 'What the People Read', p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> 'A Remarkable Career', *Register*, 21 November 1906, pp. 5-6.

memorable event of the decade was Sarah Bernhardt's week-long season in July 1891, when she starred in *Camille*, *La Tosca*, *Jeanne d'Arc*, and *Fédora*.<sup>18</sup>

Adelaideans were also appreciative of occasional visits from writers.<sup>19</sup> Sometimes these were tantalisingly brief, such as the few hours when a young, but already famous, Rudyard Kipling passed through on 25 November 1891, arriving on the overnight express from Melbourne and almost immediately boarding the SS *Valetta* in Largs Bay for his voyage back to India. The *Advertiser* was pleased to arrange an exclusive audience, but, at the outset, Kipling stated that he did not like interviews, and his generally terse responses proved this to be true.<sup>20</sup> William Lane, whose labour-movement novel, *The Workingman's Paradise*, had been published in 1892, spoke to a large and enthusiastic audience at Adelaide's Albert Hall the following April, seeking support and funding, a few months before leaving for Paraguay to establish 'New Australia'.<sup>21</sup> The tour by Mark Twain allowed a much more satisfying opportunity for literary Adelaide to savour a celebrity writer's presence than had Kipling's fleeting stopover, as is evident from a report of a lecture he gave in the *Theatre Royal* on Saturday 12 October 1895:

The reception given to the world-famed humorist was overwhelming. When the curtain rose ... the whole audience greeted him with waving handkerchiefs, hand-claps, stamping, and lusty cheers, according to the sex, fancy, and fashion of the worshipper, and the ovation was prolonged till Mark Twain was in danger of getting a crick in his carbuncle bowing his acknowledgments.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> 'Madame Sarah Bernhardt', *Adelaide Observer*, 4 July 1891, p. 36. For the best overview of theatre during this period, see Gerald Fischer, 'The Professional Theatre in Adelaide, 1838-1922', *Australian Letters*, March 1960, pp. 79-97.

<sup>19</sup> Unknown to Adelaide audiences, Joseph Conrad visited several times between 1889 and 1893, before his first novel had been published. See Joseph Conrad, *A Personal Record*, London: Nelson, 1916, pp. 51-5.

<sup>20</sup> 'An Interview with Rudyard Kipling', *Advertiser*, 26 November 1891, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> 'New Australia', *South Australian Register*, 26 April 1893, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> 'Mark Twain at Home', *South Australian Register*, 14 October 1895, p. 6.

The response to Twain was not unanimous, however, and Alfred and Margaret Cheadle told their children that they found him “shaggy” and “not as good as his books”.<sup>23</sup>

A further indication of Adelaide’s general reverence towards writers is the enormous crowd that assembled in May 1894 to witness the unveiling of a statue of Robert Burns, funded by public subscription, and prominently located on the corner of North Terrace and Kintore Avenue, in front of the Institute Building.<sup>24</sup>

### **“Not of exhilarated writers”**

As well as being right about Adelaide’s appreciative audiences for literature, Jose was correct to say that the city did not make any significant contribution to the body of bush-focused poetry usually associated with the *Sydney Bulletin* in the 1890s. Certainly, there were Adelaide writers who, like the bohemians at the *Bulletin*, imitated the ballads of Gordon and later Kipling, but none had the ability of Paterson, Lawson, and the most competent of their peers.<sup>25</sup> The chief exception was C.J. Dennis, whose first two poems in the Adelaide *Critic* share the *Bulletin* writers’ enjoyment of Australian bush vernacular and their egalitarian worldview,<sup>26</sup> but he was a decade younger than Jose’s favourites, and did not begin his publishing career until February 1898. These early efforts anticipate the style and values of *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke* (1915), which would eclipse the sales of Paterson, Lawson, and anyone else from the 1890s. By then, though, Dennis was living in Victoria.

In spite of not having any claim to long-lasting significance, a number of South Australian poets were known in London during the nineties, and this was important to Adelaide’s being named the Athens of the southern hemisphere. Thomas Gill’s *Bibliography of South Australia*, compiled in the middle of the 1880s, was far from complete, but it still managed to list books of verse by almost twenty writers.<sup>27</sup> At that

---

<sup>23</sup> Frances McGuire, *Bright Morning: The Story of An Australian Family before 1914*, Adelaide: Rigby, 1975, p. 41.

<sup>24</sup> ‘The Burns Demonstration’, *Evening Journal*, 7 May 1894, p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Depasquale, *A Critical History*, p. 139.

<sup>26</sup> ‘Comin’ ‘Ome frum Shearin’, *Critic*, 12 February 1898, p. 8; ‘The Cockie’s Man’, *Critic*, 19 February 1898, p. 5.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Gill, *Bibliography of South Australia*, Adelaide: Government Printer, 1886.



point, the only Australian poets with any level of recognition in Britain were Gordon and Kendall, but Douglas Sladen would suddenly turn the English literary world's attention to Australian poetry by publishing three anthologies in London in 1888.<sup>28</sup> *Australian Ballads and Rhymes*, released on 26 January to mark the centenary of colonisation, was an immediate success, and ultimately sold 20,000 copies. It was soon followed by an enlarged version, titled *A Century of Australian Song*, and a third anthology, *Australian Poets: 1788-1888*. After gaining some colonial experience in Sydney and Melbourne during the first half of the 1880s, Sladen had returned to England and assembled material for his anthologies, largely through advertisements in Australian newspapers. South Australian poets and their supporters responded willingly with contributions, and the three volumes included pieces from many authors associated with the colony, including Emma Anderson, Arthur Baker, H.H. Blackham, Ettie Bode, Alfred Chandler, 'Lindsay Duncan' (Mrs T.C. Cloud), Isabella Giles, Adam Lindsay Gordon, John Howell, Frances Lewin, George McHenry, 'Agnes Neale' (Caroline Agnes Leane), W.N. Pratt, James Sadler, Percy Sinnett, and Sarah Welch. In his introductions to *Australian Ballads and Rhymes* and *A Century of Australian Song*, Sladen referred to Chandler as one of "the two young native-born Australians whose poems have attracted the most notice in England", and he named 'Agnes Neale' and 'Lindsay Duncan' in a short list of the female poets "who enjoy the greatest reputation in Australia".<sup>29</sup>

Today, the large body of verse in newspapers, or in self-published volumes of poetry during the 1890s, is probably only of historical interest, as is the case with Caroline Leane's 'Adelaide: A Song' from her *Shadows and Sunbeams* (1890). Active in the Adelaide Literary Society as one of its first associate members, Leane was described by Sladen as the "Australian Adelaide Proctor", in reference to the English poet whose religious beliefs and social themes were echoed in her work. The poem shows that a fascination with Adelaide's dark underbelly could be seen even in the nineteenth century:

---

<sup>28</sup> Douglas Sladen (ed.), *A Century of Australian Song*, London: Scott, 1888; Douglas Sladen (ed.), *Australian Ballads and Rhymes: Poems Inspired by Life and Scenery in Australia and New Zealand*, London: Scott, 1888; Douglas Sladen (ed.), *Australian Poets: 1788-1888*, London: Griffith, Farran, Okeden and Welsh, 1888.

<sup>29</sup> Sladen (ed.), *A Century*, pp. 27, 29.

O Adelaide! we who gaze on thee,  
Entranced at thy loveliness stand;  
O beautiful, beautiful city!  
Fair pearl of our bright southern land.

But when night in her dark cloak enfolds thee,  
And the stars burn in glory on high,  
There cometh a moan from thy bosom  
That quivereth up to the sky—  
A moan from the hearts that are breaking  
With sin and with sorrow crushed low,  
For there's blood on thy white robes, O city!  
Foul stains on thy garments of snow.

O Adelaide! we who behold thee,  
Aghast at thy guiltiness stand;  
O sorrowful, crime-blotted city!  
Stained pearl of our bright southern land.<sup>30</sup>

~~The city could hardly claim to have made a major~~ By and large, the city made only a minor contribution to the corpus of Australian novels in the late nineteenth century; ~~either~~, although one exception was Catherine Martin's *An Australian Girl*, published anonymously in London in 1890.<sup>31</sup> A few years earlier, Gill's *Bibliography of South Australia* showed that the small colony had already produced a respectable body of novels, listing four by Catherine Helen Spence, fourteen by Matilda Evans ('Maud Jean Franc') and others from William Storrie, 'Iota', Effie Stanley, and George Isaacs. *An Australian Girl* was immediately regarded as significant, with Desmond Byrne stating in *Australian Writers* (1896) that Martin had achieved "the most perfect description of the peculiar natural features of the country ever written", and adding, "For the first time the

<sup>30</sup> 'Agnes Neale' [Caroline Agnes Leane], *Shadows and Sunbeams*, Adelaide: Burden & Bonython, 1890, p. 76.

<sup>31</sup> *An Australian Girl*, 3 volumes, London: Bentley, 1890.

**Commented [PS4]:** Phrasing too strong? You go on to suggest some significance... I suggest you rephrase the topic sentence.

Bush is interpreted as well as described".<sup>32</sup> Among other supporters was Martin's friend, Catherine Helen Spence, who agreed with the English poet and critic, F.W.H. Myers, that *An Australian Girl* and the subsequent novel, *The Silent Sea* (1892), were "on the highest level ever reached in Australian fiction".<sup>33</sup> *An Australian Girl* is also remarkable in addressing spiritual and philosophical questions at considerable depth, although probably at some cost to its popularity. Most of all, Martin's novel is important for its delineation of a proudly Australian version of the new woman, epitomizing strength, independence and self-determination.<sup>34</sup>

In spite of the positive early reactions, *An Australian Girl* was undervalued for a very long period. Paul Eggert has argued that its success was hampered by the excessive cautiousness of its publisher, Richard Bentley, who failed to issue a cheap Australian edition until three or four years after the initial reviews. Eggert suggests that, by then, the canon of Australian nineteenth-century novels had largely been established.<sup>35</sup> During the last decades of the twentieth century, feminist critics showed conclusively that women novelists of the 1880s and 1890s, such as Martin, were systematically devalued through a masculinist bias against their interest in domestic topics and their use of the romance genre.<sup>36</sup> This reappraisal of Australian literary history resulted in a renaissance for *An Australian Girl*. New editions by Oxford University Press and University of Queensland Press appeared, and so did a substantial body of criticism discussing the book's gender politics.<sup>37</sup>

The other significant novel from the 1890s was Simpson Newland's *Paving the Way* (1893), set in the area around Encounter Bay and later in the Darling district. Paul

---

<sup>32</sup> Desmond Byrne, *Australian Writers*, London: Bentley, 1896, p. 25.

<sup>33</sup> Spence, 'An Autobiography', pp. 116-17.

<sup>34</sup> Susan Magarey, *Passions of the First Wave Feminists*, Sydney: UNSW Press, 2001, p. 44. Sharon Crozier-De Rosa, 'Identifying with the Frontier: Federation, New Woman, Nation and Empire', in Maggie Tonkin, Mandy Treagus, Madeleine Seys and Sharon Crozier-De Rosa (eds), *Changing the Victorian Subject*, Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press, 2014, p. 45.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Eggert, 'Australian Classics and the Price of Books: The Puzzle of the 1890s', in Gillian Whitelock (ed.), *The Colonial Present: Australian Writing for the 21st Century*, JASAL Special Issue, 2008, p. 143.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Sue Sheridan, "'Temper, romantic; bias offensively feminine': Australian Women Writers and Literary Nationalism', *Kunapipi*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1985, pp. 49-58.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Crozier-De Rosa, 'Identifying with the Frontier', pp. 37-58.

Depasquale is critical of Newland's skills as an author but unequivocal about the book's importance, asserting that "*Paving the Way* is the South Australian novel of pioneering life: its scope is vast, its range of characters wide and representative, its narrative dimensions epic, its basic honesty impressive".<sup>38</sup> Roland Grantley, the chief protagonist, arrives in South Australia in the late 1830s as a boy, and goes on to become a consummate bushman. He expresses the kind of views underpinning the efforts of the colonists: "I will mould my own future and carve out my own destiny. In a land like this there are big prizes for the bold, the energetic, the enterprising".<sup>39</sup> Yet the novel is critical of colonisation in general, and highly disapproving of much of Grantley's own behaviour, particularly his greed, his violence towards Aboriginal people, and his poor decisions in personal relationships. In the preface to the original edition, Newland notes that the time has not yet arrived when the full truth about colonisation can be written, but, in the novel, he is surprisingly explicit about frontier killings, depicting Europeans as the ultimate cause of each instance of violence. Perhaps also surprising is the fact that, in a colony which prided itself on being free of the convict stain, Daniel Cleeve—named as one of the "oldest pioneers" and portrayed as one of the most important characters—is an ex-convict.<sup>40</sup> *Paving the Way* was widely admired during the 1890s, and there have been at least a dozen editions since, in Britain, America and Australia. In 1943, when Australian literary studies at tertiary level were in their infancy, it was included in the English syllabus at the University of Adelaide as part of a course on Australian historical novels. Today, it deserves to be better-known than it is.

In dismissing Adelaide as an outpost of Melbourne, Jose was implying that it, too, was bound by a "respectability ... of the ruling English type". Certainly, literary culture was well-supported by the Adelaide establishment: wealthy individuals, government, churches, and the university all endeavoured to encourage the reading of good literature and to foster creative writing. The prominent lawyer and politician, Josiah Symon, for instance, was heavily involved in the 1897-98 Australasian Federal Convention while he was also president of the South Australian Literary Societies'

---

<sup>38</sup> Depasquale, *A Critical History*, p. 179.

<sup>39</sup> Simpson Newland, *Paving the Way: A Romance of the Australian Bush* [1893]; Adelaide: Rigby, 1954, p. 243.

<sup>40</sup> Newland, *Paving the Way*, p. 259.

Union, and a member of both the University Shakespeare Society and the Australasian Home Reading Association.<sup>41</sup> Later, he would be patron of the Poetry Recital Society, founded by his wife, Lady Mary Symon. The Symons might have been politically conservative, but, since the 1830s, literary organisations in Adelaide had also included those with a progressive commitment to workers' education and to breaking down privilege.<sup>42</sup> When the great trade unionist W.G. Spence spoke to a large gathering at the Democratic Club in Flinders Street in February 1891 on the topic of 'The Reconstruction of Society', he urged members of the working class to get themselves onto the committees of circulating libraries to ensure that more radical books were ordered.<sup>43</sup>

Much of the verse written in Adelaide during the nineteenth century could also be classed as bound by respectability—and a good proportion was religious—but there was also a tradition of critical and disruptive poetry, going back to the first piece published in the colony.<sup>44</sup> Alfred Chandler was more radical than many, often using his poetry to support an egalitarian Australia where "old systems of unhappy serfdom" were defeated, where labourers were valued, and where "freedom" reigned.<sup>45</sup> In 1899, Herbert Hall published *Lay of the Laborer*, a poem in which he criticised current inequality and called for a fundamental redistribution of wealth and property.<sup>46</sup> Although its sentiments were radical, its form was not, and Hall's verse is sometimes almost unreadable in its attempt to imitate high poetic diction. Similarly—given their critiques either of gender norms or of the pioneering days—it would be impossible to categorise either *An Australian Girl* or *Paving the Way* as a simple embodiment of "respectability ... of the ruling English type". During the first decade of the twentieth century, a small coterie of self-styled bohemians would found the *Gadfly*, a satirical weekly in which they would publish radical verse and prose.

---

<sup>41</sup> Don Wright, 'Symon, Sir Josiah Henry (1846–1934), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/symon-sir-josiah-henry-8734/text15293>, published first in hardcopy 1990, accessed 8 February 2018.

<sup>42</sup> Bridge, *A Trunk Full of Books*, pp. 10, 16–17.

<sup>43</sup> 'The Reconstruction of Society', *South Australian Register*, 16 February 1891, p. 6.

<sup>44</sup> Philip Butterss, 'Building Literary Adelaide, 1836–60', *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2015, pp. 348–49.

<sup>45</sup> Alfred Chandler, *Songs of the Sunland*, Adelaide: E.S. Wigg, 1889.

<sup>46</sup> Herbert Hall, *Lay of the Laborer*, Adelaide: n.p., 1899.

No doubt, the city's size in the 1890s had both advantages and disadvantages for literary Adelaide. A population of 130,000 in a relatively contained area proved perfect for developing a community of audiences for literature, and the Literary Societies' Union was able to encourage fruitful interactions between a wide array of literary organisations. On the other hand, there was not sufficient interest to sustain a good journal of criticism; that was also the case in the much larger capital cities: Sydney's *Centennial Magazine* lasted only from 1888 to 1890 and Melbourne's *Australasian Critic* from 1890 to 1891. The chief drawback was that Adelaide did not have an enormous pool of literary talent; nor was the city large and lively enough to attract or keep all of the most able writers.

The local-born Guy Boothby was one who left, having tried his hand at writing for the theatre in the early 1890s. Audiences for his comic opera, *Sylvia*, were impressed by the music, written by Cecil Sharp, who was resident in Adelaide between 1882 and 1892. The libretto, however, was seen as imitative, though the public, critics, and the theatre manager, Wybert Reeve, tried to be supportive during *Sylvia*'s three performances.<sup>47</sup> Boothby's melodrama about the French revolution, *The Jonquille*, staged at the Theatre Royal in August 1891, was less well received, with the *South Australian Register* noting, dryly, that at least it possessed "the merit of being short".<sup>48</sup> Arriving in London in 1894, Boothby was enormously prolific and successful as a novelist, publishing over 50 books before his death in 1905 and earning a considerable income. Among those who left Adelaide in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to pursue careers elsewhere were Alfred Chandler, Charles Rodda ('Gavin Holt') and C.J. Dennis. Others who would follow prior to 1920 included Alice Grant Rosman, Leon Gellert, Doris Egerton Jones, and Vernon Knowles.<sup>49</sup>

### **"The Athens of the Southern Pole"**

---

<sup>47</sup> 'Amusements. Theatre Royal', *Express and Telegraph*, 5 December 1890, p. 3.

<sup>48</sup> 'Theatre Royal. The Jonquille', *South Australian Register*, 15 August 1891, p. 6.

<sup>49</sup> Depasquale, *A Critical History*, p. 196.

Adelaide's pleasure in seeing itself as a literary city was evident in the joy at the appointment of Hallam Tennyson as governor of South Australia in 1899. Since Alfred Tennyson's elevation to the poet laureateship in 1850, he had come to be a great favourite in the colony—read silently or to others, quoted in conversations, letters, sermons and speeches, reprinted in newspapers, and recited at countless literary events, school graduations and other public occasions.<sup>50</sup> Hallam Tennyson might officially have been the representative of the British crown, but Adelaide saw him equally, or perhaps more, as his father's son, the heir of one of the great literary figures of the age. The *South Australian Register* immediately interpreted the appointment as augmenting the local literary heritage and reputation:

South Australia has given to the world a master poet of Australian life in Adam Lindsay Gordon, and it may be counted a further honour to be now linked with the family of the greatest English poet of modern times.<sup>51</sup>

Delighted at having a Tennyson as its governor, the colony greeted him very warmly; he was even more generous in return. The governor and his wife, Audrey, arrived at Port Adelaide on 10 April 1899 to be met by a crowd of thousands of people and a triumphal arch bearing the word 'welcome'. After the speeches, a massed choir of 1,500 schoolchildren sang the national anthem and gave a rendition of 'Song of Australia', whose words had been written by the local poet Caroline Carleton and whose music had been written by the local composer Carl Linger.<sup>52</sup> At the civic reception in the Town Hall that same afternoon, Tennyson praised Adelaide's attributes in a speech carefully pitched to endear himself to his audience. He warmed the crowd by mentioning his father, and they responded with loud cheers. He went on:

For long I have looked upon Adelaide as the young Athens of the Southern Pole. With your keen desire for knowledge, with your keen desire for

---

<sup>50</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see Philip Butterss, 'The Tennysons in Literary Adelaide', *Australian Literary Studies*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2015, pp. 110-20.

<sup>51</sup> 'The New Governor', *South Australian Register*, 2 February 1899, p. 5.

<sup>52</sup> Alexandra Hasluck (ed.), *Audrey Tennyson's Vice-Regal Days: The Australian Letters of Audrey Lady Tennyson to Her Mother Zacynta Boyle, 1899-1903*, Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1978, p. 26.

intellectual culture, with your yearning for artistic perfection, with your Hellenic pride in all manner of athletic prowess; for long I have admired South Australia for your excellent system of education—(cheers)—for your admirable Real Property Act—(cheers)—and for your love of progress. I have an especial interest in South Australia, because you are pre-eminently, it seems to me, the land of Australian poetry—the home of Adam Lindsay Gordon, of Lindsay Duncan, of Agnes Neale, of Alfred Chandler, and many others.<sup>53</sup>

There might have been some reservations about possible slippage between “Southern Pole” and “south pole”, but many in the audience would have recognised the phrase as a reference to Alfred Tennyson’s widely-known poem of empire, ‘Hands All Round’, which named Australia as “the strong/New England of the Southern Pole”.

The governor’s use of his father’s words to anoint Adelaide as the youthful cultural centre of the southern hemisphere was, of course, very well received locally, and it was to have an enduring effect on the city’s image. One of those in the official party at the Town Hall that day was the chief justice, Samuel Way, and he referred warmly to this speech again and again in his letters, assessing it as “much the finest effort of the kind [he] ever heard” and noting, with pleasure, its “distinct literary flavour”.<sup>54</sup> The Adelaide press, too, was in raptures, though *Quiz and the Lantern* provided a blunter appraisal, reporting that “gush has been ladled out all round” and that the governor had come “well prepared to butter us up”. However, even this journal felt gratified, and the article went on to admit that the speech was “a very good one”.<sup>55</sup> The governor’s words received extremely wide coverage, with lengthy excerpts reprinted in metropolitan and regional newspapers throughout Australia.

Not surprisingly, feathers were ruffled in a few of the other colonies. A columnist for the *Sydney Morning Herald* asserted that Tennyson had, indeed, been referring to “the

---

<sup>53</sup> ‘The Governor’s Speech’, *Advertiser*, 11 April 1899, p. 6.

<sup>54</sup> Samuel Way to Reverend G.G. Coster, 19 June 1899, Samuel Way Papers, State Library of South Australia, PRG 30/5.

<sup>55</sup> ‘Hear Here’, *Quiz and the Lantern*, 13 April 1899, p. 8.



Antarctic zone”, and that Sydney, therefore, continued to be “the Athens of this continent”. In Hobart, the South Australian governor’s words were dismissed as “scrumptious flapdoodle”. Nowhere was the flattery more blatant than in his description of South Australia as “the land of Australian poetry”, and in his references to local poets, evidently based on the introduction to Sladen’s anthologies. A Victorian newspaper observed, with justification, that “very few indeed” had heard of Duncan, Neale and Chandler, and also pointed out that Adam Lindsay Gordon identified himself with Victoria rather than South Australia.<sup>56</sup>

By the late nineteenth century, the globe was dotted with neo-Athenses. Edinburgh had long been known as ‘the modern Athens’, and Catherine Helen Spence had referred to it as such in *Clara Morison*, Adelaide’s first novel. In the USA, Nashville was frequently called the ‘Athens of the South’. Zurich was sometimes termed ‘the Swiss Athens’. Even in South Australia, there was a prior claimant: the nearby city of Gawler was popularly known (with a degree of irony) as ‘the colonial Athens’, in acknowledgment of its surprising contribution to the colony’s cultural life.<sup>57</sup>

In fact, Adelaide, itself, had very occasionally been referred to as ‘the Athens of the South’ or ‘the Athens of the Southern Hemisphere’ from as early as the mid-1860s, but it was Tennyson’s speech that caused the appellation to spread widely and helped it to stick. Outside South Australia, the phrase has normally been applied with irony. For example, in 1971 an article in the *Canberra Times* began, “As every right-thinking Australian knows, Adelaide is the City of Culture, the Athens of the South, the Festival City”, before providing a lengthy summary of a recent survey which showed that Adelaideans were vastly more interested in popular entertainment than in high culture.<sup>58</sup> For locals, too, if the term has expressed pride, it has usually also contained a note of affectionate self-mockery. Most often, it has been used to draw attention to Adelaide’s failure to live up to the ideal. Five years after Tennyson’s speech, one

---

<sup>56</sup> Mercutio, ‘Unjointed Chat’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 April 1899, p. 8; ‘Clackery’, *Clipper*, 6 May 1899, p. 7; *Mount Alexander Mail*, 12 April 1899, p. 2.

<sup>57</sup> Brian Samuels, ‘Gawler, “the Colonial Athens”, and South Australia’s First Local History and First Public Museum’, *Journal of the Historical Society of South Australia*, vol. 40, 2012, p. 41.

<sup>58</sup> ‘Survey: City of Culture not Living up to its Name’, *Canberra Times*, 26 June 1971, p. 11.

Adelaidean called for a statue of Adam Lindsay Gordon, arguing that in a city described by the ex-Governor as “the Athens of the southern hemisphere”, there should be more “outward and visible signs of culture”.<sup>59</sup> In 1925, at a public meeting in the Town Hall, a similar argument was made in favour of a national band.<sup>60</sup> More recently, Alison Broinowski suggested that Adelaide under Don Dunstan might have been the closest the city ever came to the ideal of Athens under Pericles, and she says that, “If the claim about the ‘Athens of the South’ is to apply”, contemporary Adelaide needs to make an effort, drawing on its considerable strengths in “art and culture, design and creativity, education and a civilised lifestyle”.<sup>61</sup>

In some periods more than others, Adelaide has been successful in fostering strong democratic institutions, excellent educational establishments, good planning and design, attractive architecture, and a thriving cultural life. Notwithstanding the severe economic depression, the 1890s was in some respects one of those high points; in fact, Tennyson failed to mention the decade’s greatest achievement: legislation to allow women’s suffrage. Adelaide might not have been a city of “exhilarated writers” in Jose’s sense of the term, but it had many keen authors, a few of whom made lasting contributions to Australian literature. The public library and university provided solid institutional support for lovers of literature. Newspapers contained plenty of local and international verse, as well as regular reviews. Circulating libraries and bookshops offered easy access to the best and worst of British and American fiction and poetry. Even if theatre patrons had few choices of venue, they could enjoy international and national touring companies as well as local actors. Literary societies flourished throughout the city and suburbs. In the 1890s, for its size, Adelaide was a highly literary city.

---

<sup>59</sup> ‘Notes and Queries. A Statue of Gordon’, *Register*, 29 August 1904, p. 6.

<sup>60</sup> ‘A National Band’, *Register*, 22 May 1925, p. 9.

<sup>61</sup> Alison Broinowski, ‘The Athens of the South’, in Philip Butterss (ed.), *Adelaide: A Literary City*, Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press, 2013, pp. 159-60.