

“Australia – New Country, Old History”  
2005 Fulbright-Hays Seminar Abroad

*Survey of Australian Literature: A Search for  
Australian Identity*

Cheryl S. Conover, Ph.D.  
Department of Languages and Literature  
Carroll College  
Helena, MT  
cconover@carroll.edu

## Survey of Australian Literature: A Search for Australian Identity

### Summary of project

**new courses:** The Languages and Literature Department of Carroll College has just completed outlining new programs of study for our English majors. Included in these new programs is a requirement for English majors to take two courses in world literature. Presently we have only one course that fits this category, a sophomore-level general survey course in world literature. I am using my travel in Australia as the impetus to create some upper-level courses in Australian literature which could fulfill the requirement for a second world literature course.

The first course I have created is a sophomore-level general survey course, EN 289: *Survey of Australian Literature: A Search for Australian Identity*. It will be taught in the spring semester 2006. The course will include poetry, short fiction, and novels written by Australians. Introductory literature courses are geared for those students not majoring in English and usually include basic instruction on reading and interpreting literature. *Survey of Australian Literature* will also be designated as a "Global Diversity" course because it presents a culture different from the United States'. This course will have as one of its controlling themes the effect of the landscape on literature.

In the next 18 months, I am planning to create at least two more Australian literature courses, one focusing on Australian women writers, and one comparing the Australian literature of settlement with the American literature of western settlement. Both of these courses will be 300-level English courses (junior level), geared specifically for English majors. I would also like to develop a seminar (400-level) course comparing the British Victorians' view of Australia with the pre-Commonwealth writers' view. All three of these courses will require further research before I can present a detailed course plan.

### table of contents

Summary . . . . .	1
Course Overview . . . . .	2
objectives . . . . .	2
texts . . . . .	2
supplemental material . . . . .	3
course outline . . . . .	3
method. . . . .	3
Sample Class Plan . . . . .	4

## SUMMARY

### **EN 289: Survey of Australian Literature: A Search for Australian Identity**

English 289 is a special-topics sophomore-level literature survey course. It is an introductory course, designed to fulfill the literature requirement in the Core Curriculum at Carroll College. Introductory literature courses are geared for those students not majoring in English and usually include basic instruction on reading and interpreting literature. *Survey of Australian Literature* will also be designated as a "Global Diversity" course because it presents a culture different from the United States'. The course will be offered at Carroll College in the spring semester 2006 (January 9 to May 4). It will meet for 15 weeks on Tuesday and Thursday mornings from 9:30-10:45.

The course has two purposes: 1) to instruct students in the basic skills required to read and interpret both poetry and prose, and 2) to introduce students to the aboriginal and non-aboriginal Australian culture of the 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries through the literature this culture has produced. The class will be limited to 20 students. Students will be encouraged to participate in class discussion and will be required to write short analytical essays on the literature, present mini-reports on specified topics, and take a mid-term and final examination.

Organization of the course will be loosely chronological. Week 1 will be spent introducing class policies and giving the students an overview of Australian history. In week 2, students will begin examining the primary material starting with an introduction to the aboriginal peoples of Australia (1 week); the next segment will focus on the literature of settlement (mainly 19<sup>th</sup> century writings; 3 weeks); then the class will move to early Commonwealth times, focusing on the unifying and defining elements of World War I (4 weeks); the final segment will sample literature from the last 60 years (5 weeks). The final week of class will be spent discussing "What does it mean to be Australian?" Special emphasis will be placed on the effect of the landscape on the development of Australian identity.

The course will use poetry and prose texts written by Australian writers as its primary source material. Since literature is not created in a vacuum, general reference works on the history and literature of Australia and will be available for students to do beginning research. Australian art and music will be incorporated into each class whenever possible.

## COURSE OVERVIEW

### EN 289: Survey of Australian Literature A Search for Australian Identity

EN 289 will be a survey of Australian literature of the past 200 years. We will read poetry and prose by Australian writers and examine both literary and sociological elements in the literature.

#### **OBJECTIVES:**

General objectives have been set by the Department of Languages and Literature for all introductory literature courses. By the end of the course students will

- be familiar with different literary genres;
- be able to use basic terms and techniques of literary analysis;
- be able to develop multiple interpretations and responses to literary texts;
- be able to support these interpretations and responses with textual evidence, both in discussions and writing; and
- be able to understand how texts communicate cultural values and ideas.

EN 289 will also have the following specific objectives. By the end of the course students will

- be acquainted with the social and political history of Australia;
- be able to recognize certain ideas that are distinctly Australian;
- be acquainted with the influence of the landscape on Australian literature;
- be encouraged to read more literature by Australian writers; and
- be able to appreciate a culture different from their own.

#### **TEXTS:**

##### **novels:**

Franklin, Miles. *My Brilliant Career*

Keneally, Thomas. *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*

Johnston, George. *My Brother Jack*

Miller, Alex. *Journey to the Stone Country*

Morgan, Sally. *My Place*

##### **short fiction:**

*Classic Australian Short Stories*. Collected by Maggie Pickney

##### **poetry:**

*Two Centuries of Australian Poetry*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Ed. Mark O'Connor

**SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL:**

These texts are available in the Carroll College Library:

Hughes, Robert. *The Fatal Shore*

*The Oxford Literary Guide to Australia*. Ed. Peter Pierce

*The Oxford Literary History of Australia*. Ed. Bruce Bennett and Jennifer Strauss.

These website addresses will be provided as general resources:

[www.nla.gov.au](http://www.nla.gov.au) (National Library of Australia)

[www.nma.gov.au](http://www.nma.gov.au) (National Museum of Australia)

[www.nga.gov.au](http://www.nga.gov.au) (National Gallery of Australia)

[www.anu.edu.au](http://www.anu.edu.au) (Australian National University)

[www.aiatsis.gov.au](http://www.aiatsis.gov.au) (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies)

**COURSE OUTLINE:**

week 1: course introduction; overview of Australian history

week 2: the first Australians: aboriginal art, music, and literature

weeks 3-5: literature of European settlement

weeks 6-9: midterm; literature of the world wars

weeks 10-14: contemporary Australian literature

week 15: wrap-up: what defines an Australian?

**METHOD:**

EN 289 will be a discussion-based class. I will provide some brief background lectures but for the most part the students will be expected to contribute specific information through brief oral reports. Students will also do some impromptu written responses to the assigned literature. I often use these written responses as starting points for class discussion. Students will also write several short (2-3 page) literary analysis papers and present these papers to the class. Finally, the class will have a mid-term and final exam.

**Sample Class plan: short fiction (week 3)**  
**The Pioneer Woman: "The Drover's Wife"**

literary terms to be introduced and applied: protagonist, climax, point of view, narrator's voice, Freytag's pyramid of dramatic structure

supplemental music: "The Outback" (Leighton/B.Watts); "Home Among the Gum Trees" (R. Brown/W. Johnson) [from *Songs of Australia: A Swag of Aussie Songs*, CD by Dave Reynolds]

texts: "The Chosen Vessel," Barbara Baynton  
 "The Conquering Bush," Edward Dyson  
 "The Drover's Wife," Henry Lawson

objectives:

- to understand and apply the literary terms to short fiction
- to understand the value of comparison and contrast as a tool of literary analysis
- to begin to examine the effect of the Australian landscape on the literature
- to begin to recognize cultural differences by formulating a brief definition of the pioneer woman of the Australian bush and comparing this definition to students' own definition of the American pioneer woman

background:

Lawson's short story "The Drover's Wife," first published in 1898, has as its protagonist the archetypal pioneer woman of Australian literature. She lives with her four young children on the two-room homestead, 19 miles from her nearest neighbor. Her husband, the drover—what in American terms would be called a cowboy or sheepherder—is away more than he is home. The story relates her confrontation with a five-foot-long poisonous snake which has taken refuge under the floor of her house. Fearing the snake will enter her house in the night through the wide cracks in the floor, the drover's wife beds down her children on the table in the dirt-floor kitchen adjacent to the cabin, and then, with the family "snake-dog" Alligator at her side, waits for the snake to reappear from under the house. While she waits through the night, her sewing basket and "a copy of the *Young Ladies' Journal*" by her side, the matter-of-fact voice of the narrator tells of her life in the outback. Her triumph over the snake represents a heroic struggle with the forces of nature and romanticizes the harsh reality of the Outback.

The character of the drover's wife appears in other stories of the period, such as Barbara Baynton's "The Chosen Vessel" and Edward Dyson's "The Conquering Bush,"

but in both of these the wife is dead by the end of the story, killed by a swagman in Bayton's disturbing tale and driven to suicide by the bush in Dyson's story. It is the romanticized Superwoman of Lawson's story that captures the imagination of the reading public and allows Australians of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to begin to create their history.

impromptu writing prompt:

One of the short fiction writers is a woman; do you think this affects the content of the story? Explain. You may use your text. (5 min.)

discussion questions:

1. What similarities and differences do you see between the protagonists of each of the stories?
2. Does one story seem more "realistic" than the others? Less "realistic"? Why?
3. What do you see as the climactic moment in each of the stories?
4. How would you characterize the voice of the narrator in each of the stories?
5. How is the bush—the landscape—portrayed in each of the stories?
6. How are men portrayed in each of the stories?
7. What does each story reveal about the character of "the drover"?

mini-report:

Russell Drysdale's painting, *The Drover's Wife* (1945)