

Conservative Censors, Banned Books: Reading the Reports of Australia's Commonwealth Literature Censorship Board

Naish Gawen, School of Languages, Literatures, Cultures, and Linguistics, Monash University

Abstract

The Australian government's strict censorship regime of the mid-twentieth century banned a range of imported books, from popular to pornographic to literary titles. Drawing on the archived censor reports of the committee, this article will argue that Australia's Commonwealth Literature Censorship Board is best understood within a tradition of conservative thinking about literature's social function which can be traced back to Matthew Arnold. This paper examines the banning of James Baldwin's *Another Country* as an example of politically conservative anxieties about race and sexuality influencing the impetus behind the censor's decisions. It is argued that the Australian censorship project was underwritten by an ideological notion of what literature is, and how it should serve the interests of the state.

Keywords: Australian literary history, censorship, race and sexuality studies in Australia, Matthew Arnold, James Baldwin, Marxist literary criticism.

Introduction

In 1933 the Australian Customs Department created the Book Censorship Advisory Committee for the purpose of advising the minister on which imported books should be banned from entering Australia. In 1937 the body was renamed the Commonwealth Literature Censorship Board (Coleman, 1974: 17). The Board produced written judgements on the books referred to them, many of which, particularly those of member and later chair Dr L. H. Allen, are literary-critical in nature. I will argue that the censorship reports of the Board assume and promote a conception of literature as having a particular function, one which aligns with the conservative interests of the state. To situate Allen's censorship reports within a tradition of conservative culturalist thinking about English literature, it will first be necessary to visit the work of Matthew Arnold, a key figure in this tradition. The reports recommending the banning of James Baldwin's novel *Another Country* will be examined as a case study of the ideological nature of the censorship project.

Nicole Moore's study *The Censor's Library* (Moore, 2012) is a significant moment in the academic study of Australian censorship, including literary censorship. This article makes use of her research but seeks to bring Australian literary censorship into dialogue with broader debates within both conservative and Marxist literary criticism, notably the ideas of Arnold and of Raymond Williams, in his Marxist-inspired reaction against Arnold, about the cultural function of literature and its use by the state. That Arnold's conception of literature had enduring importance in the British colony of Australia by informing the state's censorship regime of the 1930s until the 1960s tells us important things about Australian literary culture and its colonial inheritances. While the banning of any number of texts could have been closely studied in this article, the racial anxieties at play in the banning of Baldwin's novel demonstrate a key issue for the Australian state at this time, and how the state invested literary censorship, and indeed an ideal notion of literature itself, with broader political – and indeed politically conservative – goals.

Locating the Commonwealth Literature Censorship Board within a tradition of conservative thinking about literature

Matthew Arnold (1822–88) is an important figure for any attempt to understand the political uses of the category of 'English literature', and the extent to which literary censorship, such as that by the Commonwealth Literature Censorship Board, plays an important role in maintaining this category. Arnold is popularly known, as James Ley remarks, as the 'intellectual father of English criticism's "social mission"' (Ley, 2014: 67). As a critic, poet and school inspector he is associated with a 'Victorian enthusiasm for literature's didactic force' (Willinsky, 1988: 119) which helped literature make its way on to school syllabi and institutionalise itself as a discipline. Arnold's project in *Culture and Anarchy* (first published 1869), in his own terms, is to inquire into 'what culture really is, what good it can do, what is our own special need of it' (Arnold, 2006: 32). The second clause of this statement is particularly important for its focus on the *function* of culture, the uses to which it can and should be put. For Arnold, culture precisely is a 'study of perfection'; it is the 'the best which has been thought and said' (2006: 34). Literature has a privileged position within Arnold's conception of culture. 'It is by thus making sweetness and light to be the characters of perfection, that culture is alike with poetry,' he claims (2006:

41). Elsewhere he states that poetry is 'simply the most beautiful, impressive, and widely effective mode of saying things' (quoted in Shumaker, 1962: 389). Wayne Shumaker argues that the 'means by which Arnold hoped chiefly to illuminate and improve mankind was by affirming the value of literature' (1962: 387), and in both Arnold's criticism and the fact of his own vocation as a poet we find evidence of this claim.

It is towards the latter parts of *Culture and Anarchy* that the ostensibly noble argument for the arts in an age of utilitarian indifference reveals itself as a conservative political project. Of those in power, Arnold states that one must 'steadily and with an undivided heart support them in repressing anarchy and disorder' (2006: 149). Precisely why this is the case is crucially relevant to his entire argument concerning culture: 'because without order, there can be no society, and without society there can be no human perfection' (2006: 149). In other words, the 'human perfection' which Arnold sees as embodied in culture is produced by an orderly society, which in turn requires a repressive state. Raymond Williams, a founding member of the British New Left, writes that Arnold was writing around a time of great 'agitation of the industrial working class' (Williams, 1993: 112). James Ley similarly argues similarly that Arnold's project was significantly motivated by anxiety about this social unrest (Ley, 2014: 73). This is nowhere clearer than in Arnold's demand that 'monster processions in the streets and forcible irruptions in the parks [...] ought to be unflinchingly forbidden and repressed' (Arnold, 2006: 149). Culture is Arnold's bulwark against anarchy, its 'most resolute enemy' (150). What we see in Arnold's ideas about culture and literature – categories he views as being universally, morally beneficent – is in fact an attempt to universalise bourgeois political interests.

Culture's 'service' and 'important function' (Arnold, 2006: 37), its 'special utility' (147) is stressed by Arnold, with those who support culture being called 'preachers' (37). Such an emphasis on the relationship between culture as an institution and the social uses to which it is put is taken up by Marxist critics Williams and Terry Eagleton. Eagleton argues that the ends that English literature actually serves under the Arnoldian view of culture are to encourage sympathy of the downtrodden for their oppressors, to distract people from the struggle to improve their lives, and to render people oblivious to the injustices by focusing them on appreciating 'eternal truths and beauties' (Eagleton, 1983: 2245). The ideal function of Arnold's conception of English literature, according to Eagleton, is to provide 'affective values and basic mythologies by which a socially turbulent class-society can be wielded together' (1983: 2243). It is at this point of understanding English literature as a *political* institution that the act of state censorship can be inserted into the conceptual schema. This article does not consider Victorian literary censorship but rather how Victorian conceptions of literature as such were still being promulgated, as will be demonstrated below, by Australian literary censors some 100 years after Arnold wrote *Culture and Anarchy*.

The ideological mission Arnold ordains for literature is threatened by books which, for example, are indecent, or incite revolutionary violence. Obscene, blasphemous and seditious content not only does not rank among the best which has been thought and said, but it threatens the very ability for English literature to be used as a vehicle of moral edification. The necessary underside of an Arnoldian promotion of a literary culture is thus the widespread and systematic banning of certain kinds of literature which do not fit the ideal conception. It is this latter task that I will argue the Commonwealth Literature Censorship Board carried out. Both promoting and banning assume a certain kind of connection between literature and the social body which requires the intervention of the state. As Williams states, Arnold recommends 'the State as the agent of general perfection' (Williams, 1993: 118). The creation of a state censorship board which promulgates a view of literature as being in superior opposition to obscenity fulfils Arnold's aim, although through the opposite means from that of Arnold himself, i.e. banning rather than promoting.

Raymond Williams, reacting to the conservative culturalism of Arnold and later of F. R. Leavis (1895–1978), pioneers a method, which he referred to later in his work as cultural materialism, which engages in analysis of the institutions surrounding the production and distribution of literature and writing, and a linking of these institutions to their accompanying social and material context (Williams, 1977: 138). While Williams does not here mention censorship as one of the institutions which influences the production and distribution of literature, it evidently is. My project to connect the practice of literary censorship to persisting culturalist ideas about the uses and services of literature for, and by, the state broadly aligns with such a methodology, extending and applying it to the Australian context of the Commonwealth Literature Censorship Board. Such a theoretical framework has been hitherto absent in discussions of Australian literary censorship, including the most notable recent work of Moore's.

The scene, so to speak, is now set for a closer look at the composition of the Board and the writings of its members, understanding how their judgements are informed and shaped by a tradition of thinking about literature which emphasises its conservative function. Censorship assisted the conservative United Australia Party government, at that time in the early 1930s openly hostile to left-wing sentiment (Barnes, 2014: 76), in achieving some of its political goals. For example, Joel Barnes quotes laws, such as Section 24A(g) of the Crimes Act, which explicitly outlawed content that promoted 'feelings of ill will and hostility between different classes of His Majesty's subjects' (Barnes, 2014: 76). The fact that the first chair of the Board, Sir Robert Garran, was a senior public servant and Federation-era bureaucrat shows the extent to which the Board was used a vehicle for the achievement of the political goals of the incoming government. Robert Darby argues that Garran 'was evidently steeped in the Victorian view of literature as a morally improving tonic' (Darby, 1986: 32) and that the Board was formed with an agenda to 'uphold Empire and family values' (1986: 31). Nevertheless, Darby concedes that the Board's initial purpose was in fact mostly administrative, a way to 'take the political heat off the minister' by excising the labour-intensive task of reading scores of books (1986: 31). However, in 1937 the Board was renamed and L. H. Allen assumed the position of chair, and henceforth the nature of the Board changed.

A lecturer in English at Canberra University College, L. H. Allen was a member of the Committee when it was established in 1933 (Wheare, 2018). While Darby argues that Allen's judgements are more liberal than Garran's (Darby, 1986: 32) a greater change is affected by Allen assuming the position of chair than simply more liberal adjudications; the Board's (essentially conservative) understanding of what literature is and should do becomes clearer in this period.

It is important to remember the nature of the prevalent literary orthodoxies around the time of the censors' involvement in literature departments. Andrew Milner describes academic English in Australia in the early twentieth century as having a 'self-consciously colonial sense of its social purpose as that of Anglicisation' (Milner, 1985: 119). 'Not until the 1950s was the hegemony of this traditional Anglophile liberal humanism challenged', Milner claims, 'and then by [...] either American New Criticism, or some version or another of Leavisism' (Milner, 1985: 121). Indeed, Allen himself wrote his dissertation on the personality of British Romantic poet P. B. Shelley (Wheare, 2018), and claimed of the Australian literary culture that 'current English literature is still a prevailing influence'. (National Archives of Australia Folder C4419: 307). As Nicole Moore points out, the Board itself described its role as enforcing 'Anglo-Saxon standards of reticence' as late as 1951 (Moore, 2012: 27). Such a literary inheritance would include its own portion of Matthew Arnold's cultural politics; the dominance of Leavisism in the period during which the Board was handing down its more controversial judgements, such as that on Baldwin's novel in 1963, is significant for the fact that Leavis's criticism is itself 'neo-Arnoldian' (North, 2017: 6). A direct line connects the two disparate time periods of Victorian Britain and mid-nineteenth-century Australia, demonstrating both the influence of the conservative ideological genesis of English literature, as well as the extent to which Australian literary culture was still being dominated by this inheritance.

Replacing a public servant with an English lecturer as the Board's chair signals an attempt to legitimise the censorship actions of the Board by an appeal to 'literary' values. Under Allen's leadership the Board adopts an aggrandised sense of purpose: the 'principle of the Board's activities is to interpret the term 'literature' in its higher sense', states Allen in a letter to the Comptroller-General of the Customs Department, who was responsible for overseeing the Board (NAA Folder C4419: 241). The justificatory letter was written by Allen in response to a query raised by the secretary of a local literary group about the status of *Ulysses* as a banned book. A book is assessed, according to Allen, on whether it makes 'a significant and legitimate contribution to the many problems that face humanity; or whether it is a genuine and penetrating examination of the human mind' (NAA Folder C4419: 305). No longer was the Board carrying out a mere bureaucratic state-function, but it was arbitrating on the nature of the literary itself. The Board in this period, by ostensibly becoming less political, became more; by retreating from an understanding of itself as a government censorship exercise, it euphemises its purpose in the vocabulary of literary taste, making the Arnoldian move of hiding a conservative political function behind the supposedly universal values of culture.

Evidence of the Board's new literary sensibility under Allen's chairmanship is to be found in the justifications of the banning of *The Wild Party* by Joseph Moncure March. Allen writes that: 'What is indecent in one book may not be indecent in another. In true and masterly studies of life there occur, no doubt, scenes similar to some of those contained in this book, but they would carry a conviction not to be found here' (NAA Folder A3203: 2). Other censors are less circumspect, calling the book 'worthless trash' (NAA Folder A3203: 3). This book seemed to be banned for the very reason of its having

insufficient literary merit. Conversely, *The Thin Red Line* by James Jones was recommended by Allen to be permitted; his judgement, again a primarily literary-critical one, pronounced that while it is 'not a masterpiece [...] the psychology penetrates deeply' (NAA Folder A3203: 203).

In addition to the newfound literary-critical purpose of the Board, a fervent moralism is to be found in Allen's writing about what kinds of literature the Board should permit. Allen wrote that the 'protection of the young is more than commendable; it is urgent' (NAA Folder C4419: 306). He just as plainly stated that the 'duty of a literary censor' is to 'debar from public circulation reading matter [...] which, if released, would be morally harmful to the community at large' (307). This heavy-handed state paternalism is quite distinct from the cultured reflections on the literary which Allen also sees as his task. The moral concern of the Board seems to pivot around the proliferation of a debased realism: 'writers are intent on stark realism and such an attitude may very well generate revulsion from its causes' says Allen (NAA Folder A3203: 239), elsewhere writing of a 'realism' that is 'often grim and savage' (NAA Folder C4419: 307). Williams writes of the concept of realism moving away from its associations with the bourgeois novel and towards 'a revolt against the ordinary bourgeois view of the world' through a 'selection of ordinary material which the majority of bourgeois artists preferred to ignore' (Williams, 1965: 301). It is this newer, politically charged realism, reacting as it is to a nineteenth-century literary heritage more amenable to the Board's predilections, which is seen by the Board to be morally damaging to a mass audience. The articulated function of the Board is therefore a dual one: it is to pronounce and indeed regulate the nature of 'literature', while simultaneously assuming the state's custodianship of public morality and censoring books that contravene it.

A year after his first pronouncements on the nature of the Board, Allen is again asked for a 'statement of the general principles of the Censorial Board' (NAA Folder C4419: 307). Precisely what 'literature' is, Allen clarified, somewhat superficially: "Literature" means properly a significant portrayal of life among any people in any age' (NAA Folder C4419: 308). It is the endeavour of the Board to 'distinguish between what is literature [...] and what, in short, is pornographic, and to ban the latter' (NAA Folder A3203: 240). The literary and moralistic purposes outlined above come together in a single, clarifying vision of the Board's function. On this view, the censor is a policeman, patrolling the borders of the category of literature, which is a category mutually exclusive with the category of the pornographic. Pornographic content, which is elsewhere referred to as indecency and obscenity, bars a text from inclusion into the literary category; it threatens the ability of literature to fulfil its Arnoldian function as the best that is thought and said. In order to preserve the higher function allotted to literature by Arnold and the institution of bourgeois criticism, the category requires strict regulation, and this is precisely the role of the censor as Allen has described it.

A case study of James Baldwin's *Another Country*

James Baldwin 1962 novel *Another Country* revolves around the lives of a group of young white and African American people in New York in the 1950s, forthrightly dealing with race relations and sexualities that were taboo at the time. The controversial banning of the book provides a case study of the blurring of Allen's distinction between literature and pornography. Furthermore, the reports on *Another Country* by Allen and Kenneth Binns provide insight into the nature of the censorship regime as ideologically motivated, in the sense that it promulgates a specific set of class interests yet disguises them in the name of a universally edifying literature. At the time of the banning, in 1963, Kenneth Binns was chair of the Literature Censorship Board and L. H. Allen had succeeded Sir Robert Garran as the appeals censor, a position more senior but less labour intensive than the chair. I argued above, drawing on Williams, Eagleton and Ley, that Arnold's cultural politics are largely motivated by anxiety about working-class unrest; the state's program of the Commonwealth Literature Censorship Board can analogously be thought of as being motivated by a fear about the consequences of a mass readership being exposed to certain kinds of messages unamenable to a bourgeois sensibility.

The distinction drawn by both Allen and Binns between the intellectual and the average reader is evidence of such an anxiety. 'Intellectual readers', or the 'intelligentsia', as Allen also called them, are contrasted with a mass public readership (see Appendix 1, lines 67, 73). Binns too distinguished between the 'serious minded student' and the 'average novel reader', recommending *Another Country* be banned for the latter but not the former (NAA Folder C4419: 213–14). This dichotomy reserves the capacity for judgement and discrimination only for certain kinds of readers – the censors themselves are these kinds of readers, of course – with the majority of the reading public thought of as passively and inertly receiving the obscene messages of books without the ability for independent thought.

Nicole Moore notes that the 'intelligent reader' concept is a 'particularly important phantasm conjured by the Board' and is always a 'well-educated, professional, heterosexual man' (Moore, 2012: 153). An obviously political configuration, the 'intelligent reader' versus the 'common reader' is the product of the Allen's infantilising attitude towards women, young people, gays, and indeed anyone outside of a narrow, highly educated patrician class. According to this attitude, the average reader is susceptible to the politically or sexually dissident messages of books like *Another Country* and therefore the literary establishment must control their access to such books.

The reports of Binns and Allen show that their anxieties about the 'average novel reader' (NAA Folder C4419: 213) accessing the subversive content of *Another Country* are manifested primarily in the subjects of race and homosexuality. Moore describes the reaction to the banning of the book by Baldwin, a prominent civil rights campaigner, claiming that the decision of the censors 'was criticised almost immediately' and that 'even apartheid South Africa did not ban Baldwin's book' (Moore, 2012: 236). Moore contextualises the ban within the racial dynamics of the era, reminding us that Martin Luther King's 'I Have a Dream' speech was delivered days after Allen's report was handed down, that the UN General Assembly endorsed a call for an arms embargo on apartheid South Africa that same year, that Indigenous Australians still were not franchised, and that the immigration restrictions of the White Australia policy were not yet history (Moore, 2012: 241). Being reminded of the contemporaneous political events alerts us to the political stakes of the decision to ban a book by an African American writer.

An awareness of this context permeates the reports of Binns and Allen. Binns recognised that for Australia to ban the book 'would be harmful to her cultural reputation', and that banning the book might be associated 'with Australia's misunderstood "White Australia" policy' (NAA Folder C4419: 213). Binns believed that 'negro author Baldwin has a message and a reasoned point of view on this vexed, but vitally important world problem' (NAA Folder C4419: 214). Given these concessions it is perhaps even more remarkable that Binns argued the book was obscene, that it would 'shock and offend the average Australian reader' (NAA Folder C4419: 213).

Allen was less ostensibly progressive on racial issues. His discomfort at Baldwin's racial messages was palpable, claiming that 'Baldwin most passionately regards the negro as the white man's superior', that Baldwin 'ignores the fact that there are "imperfections" on both sides' of the racial divide (see Appendix 1, lines 56, 40). Allen regarded himself as unable to 'believe that the white man is afraid of the black' (Appendix 1, line 30). Yet his own writing betrays a thinly hidden fear of what a changing racial dynamic would mean for the established social order. Of the recent spate of writing by African Americans, Allen wrote that 'the American Vesuvius is rumbling ominously' (Appendix 1, line 25); it is hard to not read this as a metaphor borne out of anxiety about the heightening political consciousness of black people in America and the mass movements thereby being created. He wrote too of a possibility of a 'civil war' (Appendix 1, line 54). Allen was aware that the issues discussed had a local relevance, acknowledging the book prefigured 'what Australia has eventually to face, the claims which our Aborigines are sure to make' (Appendix 1, line 60). Allen's recommendation of banning could be seen as more directly borne out of racialised fear. Indeed, this is what, as Moore points out, the reaction to the banning centred on at the time, opening the censors to 'direct charges of racism' and exposing them as 'ideological agents for the increasingly unpopular White Australia policy' (Moore, 2012: 236, 240).

However, like Binns, Allen claimed the book was being banned *despite* its contribution to the discussion of matters of race, not because of it. Allen praised Baldwin for his writing on the question of racial equality, 'one of the most absorbing problems of the day' (see Appendix 1, lines 57–58). It was, in the end, the matter of obscenity that Allen, again like Binns, invoked as a reason for the book's banning. Allen labelled references to sex in the book as 'an obsession' and 'merely puerile' (Appendix 1, lines 63, 65). It was specifically homosexual sex which offended Allen, and the scenes in which it appears are 'told with repulsive minuteness' (Appendix 1, line 81). Allen was unsure whether the book merely represented homosexuality or actually 'advocates it' (Appendix 1, line 76). Binns also believed the writing was 'continually smeared with indecent, offensive, and dirty epithets' and that the book 'would be held to be obscene in all Australian courts' (NAA Folder C4419: 213).

So, we have three registers of rationale for the book's banning: firstly, the ostensible one, a legalistic appeal to obscenity; secondly, the covert racial bias which opponents at the time argued; and thirdly, another plausible interpretation which would focus on the homophobia of the reports. Moore argues that 'Baldwin's vision of sex as politics' is 'what was banned' by the censors (Moore, 2012: 244). This may well be true, although it is arguably not useful to psychologise the censors, long dead as they are, to arrive at a conclusion as to why the book was 'really' banned. It might be more accurate to say

that the *function* of the ban, irrespective of the censors' intention, was to reinforce a dominant racist belief system operative within Australian society and government. Baldwin's novel's contribution to the 'thorny question' of racial relations, to borrow Allen's phrase (see Appendix 1, line 34), demonstrates the ability of literature to do more than the conservative function deigned to it by the literary establishment, from Arnold to Allen.

The contradictions present in Allen's report on *Another Country* provide a way in to seeing the nature of a program of literary censorship which, from its very inception, is ideological. For Marx, it is the very nature of ideology to conceal and mask contradiction (Markus, 1987: 77). The tension between literary merit and obscene content is omnipresent throughout the censors' judgements. For Binns the 'writing is imaginative and sensitive' but simultaneously 'smeared' with indecency (NAA Folder C4419: 213). For Allen, the novel is nothing less than a 'work of genius marked by great intellectual power' but he nevertheless recommends banning it (see Appendix 1, line 32). It would not be so difficult to reconcile the notion of a great literary work also being banned for pornographic content if Allen himself had not dichotomised the two categories as mutually exclusive. Let us recall Allen's dictum that the Board's role was to 'distinguish between what is literature [...] and what, in short, is pornographic, and to ban the latter'. Elsewhere he wrote that books which have 'sufficient skill and sincerity [...] cannot be classed as pornography' (NAA Folder C4419: 307). Allen's banning of Baldwin's 'work of genius' directly contradicts his own edict about the purpose of the censorship board. If we remember, too, his definition of literature as 'a significant portrayal of life among any people in any age', then on Allen's own appraisal Baldwin's novel would count as literature, and indeed Allen refers to it in these terms (see Appendix 1, line 103).

The dichotomy between literature and pornography was in fact never a workable one; works by writers such as Balzac, Joyce and Nabokov were all banned for obscenity (Moore, 2012: 29, 3, 237 respectively). If these writers were not considered literary then one wonders what writers Allen believes were. To remain consistent, Allen would need to radically revise his concept of the 'literary' and acknowledge that in fact it could include obscenity. However, to do so would change the entire theoretical nature of the Board according to his description; it would no longer be a matter of discerning 'literature' from 'pornography'. Rather, the Board's task would be to make judgements based on subjective, moralistic criteria about the appropriateness of a text for the dubious category of the 'average' reader (for we recall that the discerning 'intelligent reader' needs no such intervention into their reading practices). This latter, actual task of the Board is in line with the common conception of censorship as moralistic state paternalism. Allen's pretence that the Board's task was an arbitration between literature and pornography obscures the real nature of the Board; and it is ultimately contradicted by his judgement on Baldwin's novel. What the example of *Another Country* shows us is L. H. Allen, a man who was 84 years old at this stage, reaching the limits of his liberalism when confronted with a book radically progressive on the issues of race and sexuality. But more than just evidencing one man's reactionary politics, it shows the censorship project as one motivated by anxiety about the ability of literature to do precisely the opposite of the bourgeois function allotted to it by the state.

A way of rendering the activities of the Commonwealth Literature Censorship Board intelligible is understanding them as part of a conservative culturalist tradition. For this tradition, from Matthew Arnold to L. H. Allen, literature is allotted a social role which allies itself with the interests of the paternalistic state. 'We know that the aesthetic vision has the power to threaten reactionary social agendas,' writes Jonathan Dollimore in his discussion of sex and literature, and so 'establishment critics respond by legislating for responsible ways in which art should be approached' (Dollimore, 2001: xi, 97) – or prohibit its being approached at all, we should add. The archived documents of the Commonwealth Literature Censorship Board repeatedly evidence the conservative tendency of assigning to literature a moralistic, civilising function, and using censorship as a way to maintain this conception of what literature should be. Additionally, the documents provide insight into a particularly conservative period of Australian cultural history and its ideological entanglement within a conservative British tradition.

Appendices

APPENDIX 1: Report by L. H. Allen on James Baldwin's *Another Country*

National Archives of Australia, Folder C4419, 'Reviews submitted to Dr L. H. Allen, Appeal Censor and Chairman, Commonwealth Literary Censorship Board'. 204–10.

Baldwin, James. *Another Country*. Michael Joseph, Lond. 1963

The blurb states that the 'country' is America. As the author's signature is dated from Istanbul I thought that the title meant that he had forsaken America, especially as Cass says: 'this isn't a country; it's a collection of football players and Eagle Scouts. Cowards.' (389) ('Cowards', presumably, because they are occupied with external things, not real life.) But according to *Time* (17.5.63) he is an active propagandist in America.

The story is concerned only with a portion of N.Y., and the characters are an unattractive clique. Vivaldo, for instance, is from its slums (290). It is true that he regards Cass, the wife of the novelist Richard, as a 'highbrow lady', but that is only boyish idealism. She has enough perception to see that her husband is merely an inferior scribbler, but otherwise shows little distinction. They are, in fact, a set of ineffectuals [*sic*], and I cannot see how they represent America at large.

The history of slavery is a sordid blot on civilisation, yet it has existed since Egypt. As regards modern times, from Uncle Tom and John Brown onwards the negro problem has produced a series of books both pro and con. A generation ago *The Leopard's Spots*, violently anti-negro, stated that a drop of negro blood, in any mixture of black and white, could result in a black child, which seems to be biologically true. (See, e.g., the Sherlock Holmes story *The Yellow Face*).

Lilian Smith's *Strange Fruit* pointed out in more restrained tones some of the injustices the 'inferior' race suffers, at least in the South. *Nigger Heaven*, which deals with Harlem, attempts to show that the primitive savage remains in the black man's heart. On the other hand *Trouble in July* shows that a white mob insanely lynching a 'nigger' is no better. But what was comparatively a trickle has now become a spate; or to alter the figure, the American Vesuvius is rumbling ominously. I quote from *Time* what the author himself says: 'I think if one examines the myths which have proliferated in this country concerning the negro one discovers beneath these myths a kind of sleeping terror of some condition which we refuse to imagine'. The consternating point here is that the terror is felt by the white man, not by the negro. No doubt only Americans could give a decisive comment on this statement; but I hazard the optimist that it is biased. I cannot believe that white man is afraid of the black.

An adequate evaluation of this book requires a lengthy essay, and I shall select only a few salient points. It is a work of genius marked by great intellectual power. The suicide of Rufus, for instance, is moving tragedy; and many passages show the most acute psychological analysis of intricate mental conditions caused by a decadent social environment.

Presumably none of the literature on this thorny question is judicially non-partisan. The gist of this books suggests that the whites are black, and the blacks white. But surely there are mean blacks as well as mean white (understanding this distasteful white set as if not mean in the sense of *The Grapes of Wrath* at least as city decadents). It is with the baser aspect of the negro that the South has to deal, and it will take generations to eradicate its detestation of the 'nigger'; but Baldwin ignores the fact that there are 'imperfections' on both sides.

The climax of the story, what is really in the author's mind, is reserved for the end, where the negress Ida explains to Vivaldo, her white lover, why she committed adultery with Ellis the entrepreneur, who had promised to bring her out as a singer. The confession comes like a thunderbolt. She loathes the whites and blisters them with her scornful superiority. Ellis is only a means to an end; otherwise he is a noisome animal. To adapt Kipling 'Black is black, and white is white, and never the twain shall meet'. This appears, too, where the author, speaking of the friendship between Rufus, the negro, and Vivaldo, the white, says: 'somewhere in his heart the black boy hated the white boy because he was white. Somewhere in his heart Vivaldo feared and hated Rufus because he was black' (134). It is significant that the word feared is not stated of Rufus.

Are we, then, to understand that integration is impossible? This book gives no clue to a solution. Is a peaceful co-existence on terms of mutual equality on the horizon? *Time*, at least, mentions that President Kennedy adumbrates the possibility of a negro President within 40 years. The only other solution seems to be a civil war. Does Baldwin hint at that when he speaks of a 'condition which we refuse to imagine'? As for 'mutual equality', it is evident that Baldwin most passionately regards the negro as the white man's superior.

So much for the general drift of this book. It is enough to show that it is a work of genius concerned with one of the most absorbing problems of the day. It embraces the question of apartheid, of the great African masses who claim self-government; and of what Australia has eventually to face, the claims which our Aborigines are sure to make.

But there are other aspects of this books which concern the Censor, and these must be considered. Mr Phillips mentions in his report that 'the author exemplifies his theme too exclusively through the portrayal of sexual relations'. It seems to me an obsession. There is hardly a page on which some sexual reference does not occur, and some are quite gratuitous. See, e.g., 134–36, 142, 215. The reference on p. 195 is merely puerile.

As regards 'tabu' language, *The Sunday Times* says: 'The effect is devastating and purifying'. Perhaps the katharsis [*sic*] is homoeopathic [*sic*]. I would suggest that it palls by iteration. Intellectual readers would not be disturbed by it any more than by some passages in Rabelais; but if the word obscene has any meaning under the Act, obscenity can no further go. In the case of *The Thin Red Line* men were fighting desperately for the lives of their countrymen, and incidentally, for Australian lives. One had to take the rough-and-tumble of the language with the general situation, but I cannot see here any special circumstances to justify such floods of pollution. For the Intellegentsia, it does not really matter, but it is not suitable for indiscriminate reading.

There is a strong homosexual strain in the story, and it is uncertain whether the author analyses it in order to understand it in light of the characters concerned, or advocates it. On p. 365 it is spoken of enigmatically as 'at once blacker and more pure'. It is to be remembered that those concerned come under influences that affect their 'psychic health' (as Mr Phillips puts it). It would seem that, with the exception of Eric, the actor, who is frankly and unblushingly homosexual, the characters are spiritual weaklings who seeks factitious relief. In any case, however, the encounters are told with repulsive minuteness.

Speaking of this *The Sunday Times* says: 'there is some beauty in the idea, but there is probably unacknowledged ugliness in the event. This raises the difference between homosexuality and bisexuality. Wilson Knights treatise, in *The Mutual Flame*, on Shakespeare's sonnets, points out that the poet's affection for his friend is Uranian. Sonnet XX is a definite repudiation of any sexual act. It is an axiom that every man has some feminine, and every woman has some masculine, element. It is a matter of proposition. Shakespeare's bisexuality comes from an abundant energy in which the two almost equal elements fuse. No doubt this made him as great a portrayer of women as of men. It is to be noted incidentally that in *Troilus and Cressida* the most unjustly [*sic*] relations between Achilles and Patroclus.

I have mentioned *The Mutual Flame*, with some comments of my own, to show that the feminine element in a man can come from strength, not weakness; but the characters in this story are on a very different plane.

After these lucubrations the practical question arises as to the admissibility, or the reverse, of this book. I agree with Miss Henson that if it is a matter of total banning or free importation, the latter must be chosen. I am not particularly impressed by Mr Phillips' statement that we must 'fall into line'.¹ And, then, Australia's cultural values to be dictated from abroad? If so, why have a censorship at all? I do not say this in deprecation of Mr Phillips' verdict. On the contrary I beg the Minister to give it serious consideration. It may be that I am not in tune with the times, and Mr Phillips is. I must leave that for the Minister to decide. But I believe that the repost of the Literature Board is soundly based.² As long as genuine students of literature have ready access to the book I do not believe that Australia's cultural standards will suffer.

L. H. Allen 10.8.63

¹ Note: Mr Phillips recommended that Australia allow the book, as was the case in most other liberal democracies.

² Note: The initial 'repost' to which Allen refers recommended the book's banning.

References

Archival material

National Archives of Australia (NAA), Folder A3203. 'Decisions, with Comments, on Literature Forwarded by the Customs Department to the Literature Censorship Board, 1941–1944'

National Archives of Australia (NAA), Folder C4419. 'Reviews Submitted to Dr L LH Allen, Appeal Censor and Chairman, Commonwealth Literary Censorship Board'

Secondary sources

Arnold, M. (2006), *Culture and Anarchy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

- Barnes, J. (2014), 'The Right to Read: The Book Censorship Abolition League, 1934–37', *Labour History*, 107, 75–93
- Coleman, P. (1974), *Obscenity, Blasphemy, and Seditious: 100 Years of Censorship in Australia*, 2nd ed., Sydney: Angus and Robertson
- Darby, R. (1986), 'The Censor as Literary Critic', *Westerly Magazine*, 31 (4), 30–40
- Dollimore, J. (2001), *Sex, Literature, and Censorship*, Cambridge: Polity Press
- Eagleton, T. (1983), 'Literary Theory', in Leitch, Vincent B. (ed.), *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, pp. 2243–50
- Ley, J. (2014), *The Critic in the Modern World: Public Criticism from Samuel Johnson to James Wood*, New York: Bloomsbury
- Markus, G. (1987), 'Ideology, Critique, and Contadiction in Marx', *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 11 (3), 74–88
- Milner, A. (1985), 'The "English" Ideology: Literary Criticism in England and Australia', *Thesis Eleven*, 12 (1), 110–29
- Moore, N. (2012), *The Censor's Library*. St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press
- North, J. (2017), *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press
- Shumaker, W. (1962), 'Matthew Arnold's Humanism: Literature as a Criticism of Life', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, 2 (4), 385–402
- Wheare, K. C. (2018) 'Allen, Leslie Holdsworth (1879–1964)', in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Canberra: National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, available at <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/allen-leslie-holdsworth-5004>, accessed 14 May 2018
- Williams, R. (1993), *Culture and Society*, London: Hogarth Press
- Williams, R. (1977), *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Williams, R. (1981), 'Marxism, Structuralism and Literary Analysis', *New Left Review; London*, 129, 51–66
- Williams, R. (1965), *The Long Revolution*, West Drayton: Pelican Books
- Willinsky, J. (1988), 'Recalling the Moral Force of Literature in Education', *The Journal of Educational Thought (JET) / Revue de La Pensée Éducative* 22 (2), 118–32

To cite this paper please use the following details: Gawen, N. (2019), 'Conservative Censors, Banned Books: Reading the Reports of Australia's Commonwealth Literature Censorship Board', *Reinvention: an International Journal of Undergraduate Research*, Volume 12, Issue 1, <https://reinventionjournal.org/article/view/432/391>. Date accessed [insert date]. If you cite this article or use it in any teaching or other related activities please let us know by e-mailing us at Reinventionjournal@warwick.ac.uk.