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‘Becoming ‘Pacific-Minded’: Middlebrow Writers on the Asia-Pacific in the 1940s’

Key words

Australian literature, Asia-Pacific, middlebrow writing

Abstract

In 1945, Frank Clune wrote that Australians had learnt about Asia and the Pacific in school geography lessons, then forgot about the region. That is, he suggested, until “the biggest war in history made us ‘Pacific-minded’” (*Pacific Parade*). This paper draws on Australian authors writing middlebrow fiction and non-fiction about the Asia Pacific region in the mid-twentieth century to explore how Australian writing become globalised and acutely aware of its regional position during this period. In *Cold-War Orientalism* (2003), Christina Klein analyses how middlebrow intellectuals, texts, and institutions were crucial in educating Americans about their evolving mid-century relationships with Asia. Using postcolonial and cultural studies approaches, this paper argues that the sentimental mode of “middle-brow personalism” (Janice Radway *A Feeling for Books* 1997) enabled writers to engage their readers in wider geopolitical affairs and to inculcate affective alliances between Australians and the Asia-Pacific region.

This paper examines mid-century writers such as Frank Clune and Ernestine Hill to reveal how Australian writing operated across national borders, offering writers careers that expanded across very different readerships, publishers, and geographic region. In doing so, these writers of middlebrow non-fiction were crucial educators and cultural interpreters. Agnieszka Sobocinska (2013) describes Clune as a highly influential “asia-educator” in the post-war period, as part of her analysis of how the history of travel and tourism can be useful in expanding and complexifying the top-down, policy-inflicted tradition of Australian diplomatic history.

Klein’s excellent study uses Raymond William’s “structures of feeling” to analyse the function of cultural hegemony, and challenges to it, in middlebrow US texts about Asia. Klein identifies the unique role played by middlebrow texts that sought to both educate readers and encourage their participation in building new Cold War social and political orders. Klein argues compellingly for the role of middlebrow intellectuals, texts, and institutions in educating Americans about their evolving relationships with Asia

Thinking through middlebrow representations of travel and tourism in the Australasian region through Klein’s framework allows us to take James Clifford’s dictum to “rethink cultures as sites of dwelling and travel, to take travelling knowledges seriously” (1997). Travel writing is an ideal mechanism through which to raise serious questions about society and politics or history, in an accessible form, for a general reader. As a genre, it carries the taint of histories of racial and class privilege. Yet by association with authorial personalities, travel writing also humanizes and personalizes larger social, political, and historical issues. When readers

engaged with celebrity travelers such as Hill or Clune, they experienced an emotional and empathic response that brought them into an intimate form of relationship within the text's subject, or its author. In doing so, middlebrow travel writing sought to inculcate a particular kind of imaginative community, one characterized by engagement and a sense of the opportunities available in the Australasian world in the mid-twentieth-century.

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