A BRIEF HISTORY OF LITERARY JOURNALISM IN AUSTRALIA

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Literary journalism has a long and rich history in Australia, one that has remained to be told in the growing body of secondary literature on the genre around the world. Its fortunes have fluctuated in tandem with Australia’s industrial and social development as a result of its symbiotic relationship with the technologies that have emerged over the past two centuries. The colonial period was the apotheosis of print culture, and valuable examples of literary journalism were produced in Australia in the second half of the nineteenth century despite the pressures and imperatives of empire, the blinkers of colonialism, and practical constraints such as unreliable supplies of newsprint. The introduction of railways, the telegraph, and the rotary press underpinned the establishment of the thriving free press that hosted literary journalism. The technological advances enabled the fledgling colonies to communicate quickly and efficiently, not only with the motherland but with each other, at a crucial moment in the nation’s development as it approached nationhood in 1901.

After its early flowering, literary journalism declined temporarily in the first half of the twentieth century in the face of competition from new visual and sound technologies, the sublimation of subjectivity as a journalistic norm, and an economy that struggled through two World Wars and the Great Depression. It blossomed again with the affluence of the late 1950s. By the time of the counterculture movement of the 1960s through to the anti-authoritarianism of the 1970s, it had once more taken hold as a popular and influential form. The 1980s and 1990s ushered in an expansion of newspaper supplements and features as proprietors rode high on revenue from classified advertising known colloquially as “rivers of gold.” When the internet decimated the legacy media’s business model, Australian literary journalism found new audiences online.

To paraphrase Mark Twain, any reports of the demise of literary journalism in recent years in Australia appear to have been exaggerated. It has survived through innovative layouts of traditional print stories, publication on aggregation sites, in audio books, and even by morphing into podcasts. Yet, its future is not guaranteed. While it has developed along its own path, building audiences as the media has diversified, it continues to be threatened by emerging technologies, the closure of media outlets, and ongoing job losses in the Australian media market. This chapter, for the first time, provides an overview of literary journalism’s history in Australia and its interconnected fortunes with emerging technologies.
A Flourishing Start

The establishment of modern Australia has been recorded in literary journalism from the beginning. It appeared in the newspaper articles and books of the explorers and founders that were published in Britain to enthusiastic audiences from the time of Australia’s first settlement in 1788. For example, Watkin Tench, a British Marine Corps officer and member of the First Fleet, organized with the publishing house Debrett’s before he left England to report on his journey and his impressions of the new colony. Two books resulted that are still in print, not only for their historical value, but also for their humor, literary style, and vivid descriptions: *A Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay* (1789) and *A Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson, in New South Wales* (1793). Other early founders also wrote about their experiences in Australia, but Tench’s work is the most easily recognizable as literary journalism. He was an eyewitness who wrote using detailed scenes, in a strong narrative voice, and with an unusually open, empathetic approach in his descriptions of people—whether military, convict or Indigenous. This passage from a lengthy description of an Eora man, Baneelon, demonstrates his literary approach:

His powers of mind were certainly far above mediocrity … He willingly communicated information, sang, danced and capered, told us all the customs of his country and all the details of his family economy. Love and war seemed his favourite pursuits, in both of which he had suffered severely. His head was disfigured by several scars; a spear had passed through his arm and another through his leg. Half of one of his thumbs was carried away, and the mark of a wound appeared on the back of his hand. The cause and attendant circumstances of all these disasters, except one, he related to us.

“But the wound on the back of your hand, Baneelon! How did you get that?”

He laughed, and owned that it was received in carrying off a lady of another tribe by force. “I was dragging her away. She cried aloud, and stuck her teeth in me.”

In its earliest years, survival was uppermost in the Australian penal colonies. The military governors exerted strict control and censorship. It would take until well into the nineteenth century before a free press was established. An argument could be made that some of the letters, journals, and memoirs of the early settlers can be considered literary journalism—or at least precursors to the form—given that there was no local opportunity to publish. They were often filled with informative facts about life in this strange new world, written in lively prose, with the intention of circulation back home; sometimes, they were published in the British press. However, for the purposes of this brief overview, more recognizable literary journalism will be discussed—immersive, longform reporting published in books, newspapers, and magazines, written using the storytelling techniques usually associated with literature.

By this definition, literary journalism appears frequently in Australia’s newspapers and journals from the 1850s onwards, its fortunes closely entwined with the technological developments that enabled the establishment of a flourishing press. An example lies in the coverage of the capture of the infamous bushranger Ned Kelly and his gang, who laid siege to the Glenrowan pub in 1880. The best-remembered reports of the four journalists who initially travelled by police special train to report on the siege were by J. D. Melvin and Thomas Carrington, both of whom wrote literary journalism. Their evocative stories, replete with narrative techniques such as dialogue, description, and suspense, continue to underpin the enduring cultural industry relating to the Kelly story.
Carrington, who joined the train as the illustrator, provided the best-written and most memorable copy. His description of the Robin Hood-like Kelly emerging from the early morning mist in his home-made armor, guns blazing against the police, continues to resonate in the books, movies, and artworks about Kelly that have followed:

[A] very tall figure in white [stalked] slowly along in the direction of the hotel. There was no head visible, and in the dim light of morning, with the steam rising from the ground, it looked, for all the world, like the ghost of Hamlet’s father with no head, only a very long, thick neck … Shot after shot was fired at it, but without effect, the figure generally replying by tapping the butt end of its revolver against its neck, the blows ringing out with the clearness and distinctness of a bell in the morning air. It was the most extraordinary sight I ever saw or read of in my life … 4

While Carrington’s piece was polished for publication a week after the event, Melvin’s story for *The Argus* was filed in sections via a hastily installed telegraph on Glenrowan station. As more journalists travelled to the siege, *The Argus* published five special editions that came out every two to three hours throughout the afternoon and late into the night, as readers pressed against the glass of the newspaper office to read the latest instalments.5 Without the railway, the telegraph and the rotary press that allowed for mass-circulation newspapers, the literary journalism produced by Melvin and Carrington would never have been written or read.

Telegraphic cables began to be laid in the Australian colonies from the late 1850s, with all the major cities connected, together with London, by 1872.6 The development of the railways began at the same time, linking the cities and their rural areas, enabling the papers to boost their circulations. The concurrent introduction of the rotary press dramatically increased the papers’ capacity to print. When *The Sydney Morning Herald* began in 1831, it was a four-page weekly produced on a hand press that reached only a few hundred subscribers.7 Its foreign news was always several months late, having been brought by intermittent supply ship. By 1875, *The Sydney Morning Herald* had access to the telegraph and had installed a rotary press of the kind that had been in use in the United States from the late 1840s and Britain from the mid-1850s. These innovations allowed it to produce a staggering 14,000 copies per hour of current international and local news.8 Soon, all the major publications followed suit, installing mass-circulation presses and building large circulations at an affordable price that funded long-form literary journalism, often written by reporters far from home and lapped up by an avid reading public.

The investment by the colonies in infrastructure was an outcome of the rapid growth in population due to massive migration by the mid-nineteenth century, particularly once the settlements ceased being penal colonies. The population of Australia nearly tripled from 1.15 million to 3.17 million people in the three decades from 1861 to 1891, largely as a result of the gold rushes in New South Wales and Victoria and the resulting economic booms that followed.9 The influx of migrants from the British middle class facilitated Australia’s transition to an advanced democracy with secret ballot, suffrage for White men and women, and most importantly, universal literacy by the end of the century.10

While magazines and newspapers came and went in the volatile colonial markets, some—particularly the city newspapers and their associated weekly magazines—were consistent outlets, first for the literary sketch that paved the way for literary journalism and, from the 1850s, for the form of literary journalism under discussion here. Sometimes these overlapped. For example, Marcus Clarke, who wrote the landmark convict novel *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1874), was a well-known columnist who wrote sketches about life in Melbourne for his “Peripatetic Philosopher” column. In 1869, he immersed himself in Melbourne’s backstreets
and laneways in the tradition of Mayhew and Dickens for his “Lower Bohemia” series. He visited the poorhouses, taverns, “gas pipes” and “stone heaps,” interviewing the people he encountered and closely observing their surroundings, wanting to experience life in the slums as far as he could on its own terms. His commentary reached for understanding rather than condemnation:

The place is hot, stifling, smelling like a shambles, reeking with human meat … Men—apparently not by any means scrupulous—have told me that they would rather sleep in the streets than in one of these places; and I believe them.

Two other Australian literary journalists—John Stanley James and Catherine Hay Thomson—also focused on the marginalized and powerless of Melbourne in their investigations, echoing the growing campaigns against poverty in the American and British presses. John Stanley James, also known as Julian Thomas, took full advantage of undercover immersion for his lengthy articles in 1876–77. He used the penname “A Vagabond” to report on conditions in some of Melbourne’s toughest institutions. Going further than James Greenwood’s pioneering articles on the urban poor written for London’s Pall Mall Gazette a decade earlier, the Vagabond took lowly paid positions for extended periods in jails, hospitals, asylums, and poorhouses. Where Greenwood wrote sensationally about his observations, feeding the prejudices of his readers, James wrote with empathy. Greenwood, for example, began his series with a warning that “no language with which I am acquainted is capable of conveying an adequate conception of the spectacle I then encountered.” His articles went on to describe “horrors with which [he] was surrounded” and from which there was no “escape.” James, in contrast, wrote from the perspective of the male inmates of the institutions he infiltrated, advocating on their behalf and triggering official inquiries that led to improved conditions. His articles were often leavened with humor, sometimes veering into gonzo-style passages reminiscent of the work of Hunter S. Thompson, such as this one from his series “A Month in Pentridge” where, as an undercover staff member, he was called on to pull out the tooth of a prisoner:

“You can pull out teeth, I suppose?” said the doctor, turning to me. I sort of hesitated. “Who was the man?” I asked. “The hangman Gately, but they call him Balleyram here,” was the reply. I accepted the doctor’s case of instruments with alacrity, and expressed my readiness to pull out every tooth in “Balleyram’s” head. I have never had any practice in dentistry, and this was my maiden effort in that line. With any other subject I certainly should have hesitated, as I dislike giving needless pain; but Gately I had little sympathy for … “Now, then, old man, let’s have a look at this tooth.” He opened his foul jaws. Faugh! “Sit down.” “Oh, doctor, don’t hurt me,” he cried, as, with a professional air, I opened the pocket-case, and spread the forceps on the little table. “Oh!” he cried, as the first pull broke off a piece of the tooth, the forceps slipping. “Just hold his head, and if he stirs bang it against the wall,” said I to one of the warders. There was a laugh— the new dispenser was “a queer sort,” evidently. I took out the largest and strongest pair of forceps, which would pull a tooth out of a crocodile. One grip, a roar from Gately, a twist of the wrist, and out came the tusk. With the consciousness of talent, I wiped the instruments carefully, whilst the warders looked on admiringly. “I must get you to look at my teeth,” said one of them. “Have it out now,” said I. “If there’s one thing I can do better than another, it’s this—I’m—on teeth.” The warder shuddered, and said he hadn’t time just then.
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As discussed elsewhere in this volume, Catherine Hay Thomson, a feminist and educator, took up the Vagabond’s mantle. In 1886, a year before Nellie Bly famously feigned hysteria to report on a New York madhouse, she went undercover to report on the conditions endured by ill and destitute women housed in many of the same institutions investigated by James. Her literary journalism was extraordinary in the context of the day. Journalism in the nineteenth century was seen as an unseemly occupation for women. At the time of Hay Thomson’s series, women were beginning to be recruited by the press to work on women’s sections and columns that would become staples of newspapers and magazines through most of the twentieth century. On the one hand, this trend led to more permanent journalism jobs for women; on the other, it kept them out of newsrooms and confined to writing on domestic matters from childrearing to cooking. It was, overall, a backward step for women journalists’ professional development.

The literary journalism of both James and Thomson was published in The Argus, one of Melbourne’s leading daily newspapers. The paper repeatedly took risks sponsoring some of the best and most innovative examples of literary journalism written in the colonies. Of the weeklies, the national magazine The Bulletin, published in Sydney, was also a regular outlet for the form. Named after the San Francisco Bulletin, it was launched by John Haynes and J. F. Archibald in January 1880. The first issue carried literary journalism, most likely written by Archibald himself, on the hangings at Darlinghurst Gaol of Captain Moonlite and Thomas Rogan, the Wantabagery bushrangers; Archibald was opposed to capital punishment. Three thousand copies were printed of the first issue, which quickly sold out. It was an auspicious beginning; The Bulletin became Australia’s longest-running magazine, continuing publication until 2008.

The Bulletin was celebrated in the colonial era for supporting republicanism, becoming the voice of Australia’s emerging national identity. It opposed late-colonial imperialism, including Australia’s participation in British military campaigns in the Sudan and South Africa. Larrikin in its approach, The Bulletin lampooned politicians, businessmen, prohibitionists, and feminists, with particular scorn reserved for Aboriginal people and Asians. Its masthead until the 1960s was “Australia for the White Man.”

Colonialist ideas of British racial supremacy pervaded Australian journalism. The link provided by the telegraph confirmed Australia’s relationship with the motherland and strengthened imperialist attitudes in the colony. While John C. Hartsock suggests empathy is a feature of literary journalism, colonial Australian literary journalism demonstrates it was not an automatic by-product of the immersive nature of the form, but also depended on factors such as the zeitgeist at the time it was written, the political outlook of the media proprietor, and the sensibility of the journalist. For example, several well-known literary journalists went undercover on the trading ships to report on the scandal-ridden “blackbirding” trade. At different times over a period of 20 years from the 1860s to the 1880s, reporters Henry Britton, John Stanley James and J. D. Melvin were sent by The Argus newspaper to ascertain the “truth” about the trade in human labor from the Pacific Islands to Queensland’s sugar plantations. While The Argus was innovative in some ways, it was conservative on questions of money and empire. All three men wrote condescendingly towards the South Sea Islanders, finding no real concern with the way in which they were “recruited” to the trade. While the articles are important for their detailed recreations of the blackbirding trading practices, they can be difficult to read because of their inherent racism, but these reporters were men of their time, entrenched in the cultural values of their day and the goals of empire, including the need to boost the economies of the colonies in the absence of free convict labor.

An exception to the trend was George “Chinese” Morrison. Morrison, an adventurer and failing medical student, took to the sea to see for himself how recruiting was done. The
resulting eight-part series, entitled “A Cruise in a Queensland Slaver,” published in The Age’s weekly Leader magazine in 1882, is mostly written with self-conscious, glib humor. Yet, the articles also reveal flashes of empathy, particularly in Morrison’s descriptions of the illnesses endured by the Kanak passengers. The South Sea labor trade was the subject of fervid debates in the colonial presses, particularly in the southern states. After an extraordinary solo trek traversing the Australian continent on foot from north to south, Morrison returned to Melbourne not long after the series was published to much criticism from some sectors of the public, including church leaders. Within two weeks, he wrote a 2,700-word letter to The Age, recanting his earlier position and protesting against blackbirding as a form of slavery.24 “I do not use this word in any claptrap sense. It is the way we always speak of the trade on board the schooners engaged in the trade itself.” Acknowledging kidnapping was rare by the time he was writing, “except under very exceptional circumstances,” he described at length the way Kanaka laborers were obtained by trickery.25 There was strong pushback from the Queensland authorities,26 but Morrison would go on to build a career as an international journalist, becoming the Peking correspondent for The Times and political adviser to the Chinese government.

The prohibitive cost of sending telegrams, the unreliability of cables and the difficulty of accessing telegraph stations in a war marked by skirmishes, and ambushes on the African veldt also influenced the literary journalism produced in the Boer War. While there had been intermittent war journalism since Australia’s first war correspondent Howard Willoughby was sent to report on the Third New Zealand War in 1863–64, this was the first time a large number of Australian journalists were sent to cover a war.27 They were involved from the beginning and sent back long, well-crafted pieces reflecting their personal experiences at the front, as prisoners of war and under siege, but often by sea rather than via telegraph. With Federation imminent, they were mostly intent on demonstrating that the emerging nation was a loyal subject of the British Empire, as well as deserving of its independence from colonial status. As a result, jingoism was common, with an emphasis on the heroism of the Australian troops.28

One of the best-known literary journalists of the era was A. B. “Banjo” Paterson, who travelled to South Africa in 1899. He reported on the relief of Kimberley, the capture of Pretoria and the surrender of Bloemfontein for The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age.29 The quality of his reports attracted the attention of Reuters, which appointed him a correspondent.30 Paterson was already a much-loved poet in the pages of The Bulletin when he travelled to South Africa. Many of his reports reflected his poet’s sensibility as he experimented with subjectivity, imagery, and sound in ways that foreshadowed Tom Wolfe and the American literary journalists of the 1970s, as the following passage shows:

Hurrah! Look at the Boers scooting. Give ’em another round. That’s a good shell! Pee-u-u-u-w. Pee-u-u-u-w. Great Heavens they’ve got that great hill in front of us. …Pee-u-u-u-w. Pee-u-u-u-w. The dust kicks up in front, and a few twigs fall from a tree overhead. Whack! Your companion staggers forward and you catch him before he falls. “Have you got it?” “Yes,” he gasps. “I’m done for. Hit through the body.” A doctor is hurrying past and you hail him sharply. “Here! Here’s a man badly hit.” You pick him up between you and carry him back, but all the time the bullets whistle past, and the wounded man almost shrieks with pain. “Put him down here,” says the doctor, selecting the base of a small bush, and carefully you lay the sufferer down. The doctor makes a hasty examination and silently puts a bandage around the body. “How bad is it?” mutters the wounded man. “Is it through the body?” “Not at all, not at all,” says the medico, “only through the loins. You’ll be all right.” He lies glibly but
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unconvincingly, and the sufferer’s face goes an ashen grey. The doctor hurries off and you are left alone with the dying man. It is an unenviable experience.³¹

Through his verses in *The Bulletin*, Paterson had been cultivating the idea of the typical Australian as a tough, laconic man of the bush. He consolidated his efforts with his war journalism—in prose and poetry—promoting the daring and decency of the Australian soldiers as the fledgling nation struggled to assert its identity.

Literary Journalism in the Post-colonial Period: The Ebb and Flow of a Fluid Form

Literary journalism recedes from view in the first half of the twentieth century, not coming into prominence again until after the mid-1950s, and not fully claiming the spotlight until the 1960s and beyond. The reasons for this decline lie in a combination of powerful forces that converged towards the end of the nineteenth century. Just as Steven Maras and Michael Schudson argue that there is no “magic moment” that can account for the rise of objectivity, there is no corresponding easy answer to the sublimation of literary journalism in Australia during the first half of the twentieth century.³² The invention of the telegraph, which allowed for speed in reporting, the establishment of wire services that required standardized “copy,” the commercialization of news, and the growing professionalization of journalists as reliable information-gatherers were all factors that contributed to a turn toward objectivity in the nation’s newsrooms. Australian society was also soon consumed by the economic impact of two World Wars and the Great Depression.

The invention of the telegraph, which revolutionized communications in Australia, was a key factor in the slow disappearance and re-emergence of what modern readers recognize as literary journalism. Its expense and unreliability, together with the fact that it required an operator to type the message with one finger, resulted in reporters writing short pieces, putting the most important facts at the top of their stories to avoid losing valuable information in the event the wire went dead.³³ In 1935, Australian Associated Press (AAP), the nation’s first wire service, was founded, just three years after the national broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), began with its offering of coordinated radio news. The commercial success of wire services was dependent upon reporters producing copy that could be sold to as many media proprietors as possible, regardless of political orientation, which meant reporters concentrated on facts rather than the more descriptive writing style that we associate with literary journalism.

The rise of photography also meant that newspapers could replace detailed descriptions with a picture and a brief caption. *The Sydney Morning Herald* published its first news photo in 1908, and in 1929 telegraphed photos were sent from Sydney to Melbourne, “using the new picturegram service,” and printed in *The Argus*.³⁴ From the 1930s, cinema newsreels supplied Australians with a weekly digest of news and entertainment, providing the template for television, which debuted on the ABC in 1956.³⁵ The period was also one marked by the deprivation of the war years and the economic austerity of the Great Depression. Until 1941, newsprint paper was imported from Canada, the United States, and Scandinavia, and paper shortages and rationing affected news and magazine production.³⁶ Considering the economic climate and the significant resources required to produce a newspaper, it is not surprising that an editor would not have the appetite for literary journalism.

By the mid-1950s, Australia had fifteen metropolitan daily newspapers and seven Sunday papers owned by nine proprietors. Magazines included the mass-circulation women’s
publications, general magazines such as the *Australasian Post* and *AM*, and magazines that catered for niche readerships. In 1956, the first national prize for journalism, the Walkley Awards, named after its founder, oil-magnate William Walkley, was established. The Award included a prize for feature writing, 23 years before the U.S. Pulitzer Prizes introduced the category.

Graham Perkin, who was the editor of the *The Age* from 1966 to 1975, was a gifted feature writer who employed the techniques later championed by New Journalism, long before the term was used. In his 1959 Walkley Award-winning article about a young girl’s heart operation, he described her lungs as “super-charged dumplings” and her heart as “the fount of life … bare, bleeding and exposed to the eyes of men.” Under his stewardship, Perkin encouraged journalists from *The Age* to “write more freely and probe more deeply,” setting up an investigative unit, “Insight.”

By the 1960s, the views of postwar French philosophers were gaining traction in Australian intellectual circles, and a questioning of the establishment had begun to take hold. In the United States, the New Journalists led the charge in challenging what they saw as the strait-jacket of objectivity and false notions of an objective truth, providing inspiration for aspiring Australian literary journalists. One was Evan Whitton, who won the 1967 Walkley Award for best feature for his story “Life on the Pension,” where, reminiscent of James Greenwood and John Stanley James before him, he documented his own experience of trying to survive on welfare.

To keep warm on his assignment, Whitton would read in the State Library of Victoria. One day he read correspondence between American writers Tom Wolfe and Frank Kermode on the techniques of New Journalism. Whitton remembered what his boss, the editor of the *Truth* newspaper, Sol Chandler, had told him: “My dear boy, I want every detail—not just the significant details, all of them …” Whitton complied, writing scenes that included detailed descriptions of his daily routine, his expenses, and the ordinary people he met, such as “Miss Summer,” who “is angular; smiles, but can be sharp; smokes Alpines.” Whitton pioneered “pattern journalism,” writing that involved “[p]utting into strict chronology a series of facts or events that have been reported piecemeal.” Whitton said his approach had two advantages: “it enables the pattern to emerge and it enables the piece to be written as a narrative, and you may produce the so-called compelling read.”

Whitton’s 1974 investigation into the Whitlam government’s cover-up of the 1964 *Melbourne–Voyager* ship disaster, and his 1975 investigative feature “The Truth About Vietnam,” which exposed the Menzies government’s falsehood that the U.S. government pressured it into sending troops to Vietnam, are examples of his approach.

Whitton became editor of the progressive *National Times* from 1978 to 1981. Under his leadership, journalists were encouraged to pursue the kind of rigorously researched and engagingly written narrative journalism that he had pioneered. Like Whitton, journalist Craig McGregor had also read the work of the New Journalists and pioneered pattern journalism, experiential reporting, and the use of fictional techniques in Australia. But unlike the support that Whitton received from Chandler at the *Truth*, McGregor recalled that his editor at *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Guy Harriot, refused to publish his stories about his experiences in America between 1969 and 1971, dismissing them as “flashy, egocentric, radical, rubbish.”

Throughout the 1970s, there were also a number of smaller, influential newspapers and magazines that, because of Australia’s vast size and small population, did not last long. Exceptions included the aforementioned *National Times* (1972–86), and the fortnightly *Nation*, which published literary journalism and was founded by Tom Fitzgerald and George Munster. The *Nation* (1958–72) was credited by early contributor Peter Ryan as being “a nursery for young writers” of literary journalism, including Robert Hughes, Brian Johns, and Bob Ellis. Rupert Murdoch based his vision for the country’s first national newspaper, *The Australian*
In the late 1970s, the Melbourne Age, drawing inspiration from The New York Times and the Los Angeles Times, introduced a range of supplements, covering topics such as fashion, entertainment, and sport. In the early 1980s, The Sydney Morning Herald also attracted new advertising and readers not targeted by the main section of the paper. In 1983, John Fairfax and Sons, publishers of The Sydney Morning Herald, took over The Age, introducing the Good Weekend, a color magazine insert, to both papers in 1984. Competing newspapers followed suit. But the rise of the celebrity profile through the late 1980s and 1990s, at a time when Australians were buying more magazines per head of population than any other country in the world, saw competition increase for space for literary journalism that focused on the lives of ordinary people. By 1992, magazines out-sold newspapers for the first time, $810 million to $762 million. Amid the competition, inserts such as the Good Weekend provided a platform for some of the nation’s most gifted writers.

**Literary Journalism in the Internet Age: A Rising Tide?**

At the turn of the millennium, the digital revolution dried up the rivers of advertising gold that had flowed so freely during the 1980s. This left many legacy media outlets in Australia struggling to find a new business model, resulting in closures and massive job losses. An exodus of experienced journalists meant that the reality for those left behind was more work and the added demand of a 24-hour news cycle. In 2001, however, literary journalism did find a new home in the Quarterly Essay, which features a 25,000-word piece by a prominent journalist or author on a single topic of public interest. The Griffith Review (2003– ), New Matilda magazine (2004– ) and The Monthly (2005– ) also accepted literary journalism. Amid these success stories, though, there have been closures, including the Independent Monthly in 1996, The Bulletin in 2008 after 128 years, and Eric Beecher’s Eye Magazine, which closed in 2010 after only six months.

There are many outstanding examples of literary journalism that have been written in recent years, stories which include narrative devices such as scene setting, narrative voice, dialogue, and what journalist Tom Wolfe, in his description of New Journalism, described as evidence of a person’s “status life.” Among such stories is Chloe Hooper’s “The Tall Man,” about the death of an Aboriginal man in custody, published in The Monthly in 2006, which won that year’s Walkley Award for Magazine Feature Writing. The following passage demonstrates Hooper’s skill at writing a scene that provides readers with an insight into the tensions she experienced. The illumination is achieved through Hooper’s description, strong use of the first-person voice, and her precise placement of dialogue:

> Two naked toddlers are playing under a tap. Elizabeth stands at the door. She has an almost stately quality. But during this first meeting she seems fierce, as if controlling, just, a steady rage. Awkwardly, I tell her I am a writer hoping to follow the inquest...
into her brother’s death. She is circumspect, but later in court I hear her complain to the island’s chairwoman that people are taking notes. She asks for everyone other than me to be banned from writing: “We got our writer here.”

Later in the story, Hooper shows readers the toll that empathy took on her, describing how she became overwhelmed after listening to an Indigenous woman tell the court how she was forcibly removed from her family:

It’s too much: I want to leave. All I want to do is get on a plane and leave. And when I do, I feel myself shaking. I get home and I’m still shaking days later. It’s overwhelming: the relief of being able to walk away from this, of this not being my life.”

Seven years later, Indigenous writer Melissa Lucashenko, like Hooper, employed a strong first-person voice to write about poverty among Australia’s working poor. Published in 2013 as part of the tenth anniversary edition of the Griffith Review magazine, Lucashenko’s “Sinking below Sight” describes how she returns, newly divorced and with her unwell teenager, to the Queensland city of Logan, south of Brisbane. Logan is one of the poorest regions in Australia, where she briefly lived as a child, placing herself “squarely in what Brisbane Aborigines refer to as the ‘Black Belt’”:

Our inaugural visit to the local shop became family legend; as we pulled up in the car, exclaiming, League of Gentlemen style, that these same establishments were to be our local shops, we were interrupted mid-recitation by a junkie hurling out the Foodland doors to projectile vomit on the footpath not three metres away. We fell about, snorting and leaking with laughter. Ah, the serenity. Four years later that same shop was at the epicentre of the 2013 Logan City riots, three nights of fighting which saw young men armed with fence palings and baseball bats warring on your TV screen.

The above passage demonstrates Lucashenko’s ability to use the literary journalism device of scene setting while leveraging the first-person voice to inject unexpected humor into her description. She then contrasts the laughter with an image of the riot yet to come, including a mention of the grim “status markers” of makeshift weapons. Throughout her story, Lucashenko forces readers to confront the reality that, “The mass of the rich and the poor are differentiated by their incomes and nothing else, and the average millionaire is only the average dishwasher dressed in a new suit … Everyone who has mixed on equal terms with the poor knows this quite well.”

In 2014, in his Quarterly Essay piece entitled “That Sinking Feeling,” Paul Toohey wrote about asylum seekers trying to navigate Australia’s labyrinthine immigration policy. Toohey’s 110-page story demonstrates how effectively literary journalism can communicate complex issues to readers in a way that is informative and emotionally engaging. In the following passage, Toohey employs the second-person “you” pronoun with a sharply drawn scene and sparse but effective dialogue to convey his own anguish during the interviewing process:

Yet getting too close to asylum seekers could be soul-destroying. With those stuck in Indonesia, awaiting UNHCR approval, or stranded after being robbed by the smugglers, every interview would finish with the same words: “Can you help me?”
They would ask that you approach the Australian government, or the UNHCR or IOM, on their behalf. What could you do but promise to write a story? Even that was a convenient lie. It was not possible to tell all their stories.71

Writers such as Toohey, Lucashenko, and Hooper, are just a few examples of how Australia’s magazine culture has provided a welcome home for literary journalism for the past 20 years. But new publications dedicated to literary journalism, combined with the shift of many newspapers and magazines online, have also created new opportunities for Australian writers of the form to reach a global audience.72 Margaret Simons’s article about the children sex tourists leave behind was first published in the Guardian Australia and then in the international Guardian Weekend,73 where she won a Foreign Press Association Media Award for best travel and tourism story of 2019.74 Simons’s opening paragraph is an eloquent example of the literary journalism technique of scene construction:

Brigette Sicat will not be going to school today. She sits, knees to chest, in a faded Winnie-the-Pooh T-shirt, on the double mattress that makes up half her home. At night, she curls up here with her grandmother and two cousins, beneath the leaky sheets of corrugated iron that pass for a roof. Today, the monsoon rain is constant and the floor has turned to mud.75

After introducing readers to 10-year-old Brigette, Simons describes how she asks the girl what she would like to say to the father she has never met, writing how Brigette “bursts out in Tagalog: ‘Who are you? Where are you? Do you ever think about me?’”76 The dialogue injects a sense of immediacy and urgency to the story.

In addition to the opportunities offered by media sites online, new publications dedicated to the aggregation of literary journalism, referring readers to the original publication site of the story, have provided platforms for Australian writers to showcase their work. In 2009, the site Longreads was launched, followed by Longform in 2010.77 Margaret Simons and her fellow Australian writers, Fenella Souter and Andrew McMillen, have had their literary journalism published on the Longreads site,78 while New York-based Australian writer Madeleine Watts has been published on both the Longreads and the Longform sites,79 evidence of how Australian literary journalism has reached a wider audience through these platforms. All four writers skillfully employ a range of narrative devices such as scene-setting, the use of first person, and the reconstruction of scenes and dialogue to create compelling narratives. Their stories, which cover such diverse topics as refugees, drowning, the right to die at home with dignity, Australia’s fraught relationship with its colonial past, and the perils of skin-cancer, share the common ground of telling the stories of ordinary people in a way that illuminates our understanding.

In Simons’s story, “The Karen Road to Nhill,” about refugees who made the journey from Myanmar to the small town halfway between Melbourne and Adelaide, she transports readers to the world of Kaw Doh: “This is home now, he says. It is a good place. But he misses the hills and jungle. Ask him what he hopes for his children, and he weeps. Hope, after all, can be as sharp as a knife.”80 Fenella Souter introduces readers to her story in the first person, writing “I had known my friend Merav for a long time before she told me the story of how she almost drowned one summer and the hand of God had saved her.” She then reconstructs that day: “It begins with a burst of youthful hubris. It’s an overcast December day in 1970 and 18-year-old Merav and her then boyfriend have travelled to Victoria’s Gunnamatta Beach for a romantic walk.”81 In Andrew McMillen’s feature on the fight for people to choose to die at home, he uses dialogue to convey an intimate moment between the doctor and the patient’s family:
“There’s not much quality of life there anymore, is there?” the doctor asks gently. “Are you guys ready to let it go?”

“It’s probably better if we all had a pathway,” Sandra replies. “I don’t think prescribing antibiotics is the right thing to do.”

Camille nods. “I think you’re making the right decision,” she tells mother and daughter.

Writing about her Australian childhood from New York, Madeleine Watts chose the first-person voice to describe how, when she was eight-years-old, she found a pile of women’s clothes in the school playground early one morning:

I asked our teacher later that day about the woman those clothes must have belonged to, and whether she was naked now. I was worried because it had been so cold the night before. Why were the woman’s clothes there, I asked, and not on her body? And where was that body now?

Literary journalism in Australia has also found a haven in the nonfiction book market. In 2005, the Walkley Foundation introduced an award for book-length journalism, and it consistently attracts more than 60 entries each year. Winning entries provide insight into issues that have challenged Australian society. Louise Milligan’s book, The Cardinal: The Rise and Fall of George Pell, won in 2017. A year earlier, Indigenous journalist Stan Grant’s book, Talking to My Country, took the prize. Paul Kelly’s Triumph and Demise won in 2014 for its exposition of the Labor Party’s rise and fall, and in 2013 Pamela Williams’s Killing Fairfax exposed the inner workings of a media industry whose concentration of ownership is among the highest in the world.

David Dowling, in his 2019 book, Immersive Longform Storytelling, held out hope for “a golden age” of literary journalism in the digital era, arguing that “journalism now borrows from the grammar of cinema and photography in hybridized online forms such as the multimedia feature.” Dowling describes how The New York Times’s multimedia feature, “Snow Fall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek,” published in December 2012, ushered in exciting opportunities for journalists to tell their stories online. When Guardian Australia launched its fully online platform in May 2013, the publication marked the occasion with their own answer to “Snow Fall”: “Firestorm,” an intricate, multimedia feature that told the story of the Dunalley bushfire in Tasmania in January of that year, through the experience of the Holmes family. The story threads the prose of feature writer Jon Henley and interviews with survivors with the sounds of helicopters, high winds, and burning trees. It also includes video of the bushfire that was shot by residents, heightening the sense of intimacy for the viewer. But it is Henley’s prose that is integral to the power of “Firestorm.” In the following passage, Henley’s words are superimposed in white text over a photo taken by Tim Holmes of his family clinging to the jetty to shelter from the bushfire. The noise of wind and the crack of trees burning can clearly be heard in the background:

So Tim lifted his wife’s phone, stepped back a couple of metres, and took these pictures. Straightaway, he sent a couple—Tammy and the kids huddled in the water, clinging to the jetty; Polly the springer spaniel weaving about above them; a mesmerizing, terrifying wall of flame behind—to Bonnie, with a brief message: we’re alive.

Henley, in an interview about the making of “Firestorm,” said that while the Guardian Australia team was in new territory, its members all understood that the writing was central: “We didn’t
really know what form that would take but we knew there would be an interactive and we knew there would be a good piece of traditional long-form writing, kind of New Yorker essay length: 13, 14, 15 thousand words.”89 The Guardian’s special projects editor, Francesca Panetta, explained the importance of integrating the language with the audio and video elements:

“The way you manage to fuse and synthesise things together is actually by physically being together and really collaborating … So those days that Jon was actually writing into the B-roll, into those images, that’s when it really fuses.”90

“Firestorm” took three months to complete and involved 23 staff members, resulting in a six-chapter multimedia feature that included the option of purchasing an e-book with extra material.91 “Firestorm” won the 2013 Walkley Award for Interactive Media Storytelling and, more than seven years later, the package has lost none of its impact, providing a powerful record of the extraordinary event.92

**Conclusion**

It is true that there has been, and continues to be, an impressive range of literary journalism published across multiple platforms by Australian writers—far more than can be included in our limited discussion. But any optimism inspired by the talent and adaptability of literary journalists must be tempered by the extensive and ongoing job losses in Australia’s media market. A research report in 2018 estimated that more than 3,000 journalism jobs were lost between 2008 and 2018.93 The job losses continue to escalate, with 157 newsrooms closing temporarily or permanently since January 2019.94 While there is optimism—and even hope—for the future of literary journalism in Australia, it is unclear how the forces of technology, commercialization, professionalization, and politics will continue to impact a form that, at its best, explains who we are to each other and who it is we want to be.

**Notes**

1 Known to modern Australians as Bennelong, he gave his name to the point on which the Sydney Opera House stands.
2 Tench, *1788*, 118.
3 McDonald and Davies, “Creating History,” 33–49.
4 Carrington, “Catching the Kellys,” 18–19.
6 Anderson and Trembath, *Witnesses to War*, 22.
7 Young, *Paper Emperors*, 64.
8 Young, 68.
12 Hergenhan, 173.
13 Hergenhan, 167.
14 Hergenhan, 167.
16 Greenwood, 17.
17 James, “A Month in Pentridge,” 4.
18 Clarke, *Pen Portraits*, 4.
19 See McDonald, Avieson, and Davies, “Australian Colonial Narrative Journalism”; McDonald, Avieson, and Davies, “J. F. Archibald.”
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20 Wotherspoon, “The Bulletin.”
22 Hartsock, A History of American Literary Journalism, 151.
24 Pearl, Morrison of Peking, 35.
25 Morrison, “The Queensland Slave Trade.”
26 Pearl, Morrison of Peking, 37–40.
27 Anderson and Trembath, Witnesses to War, 22, 32.
28 Anderson and Trembath, 22, 35.
30 Trioli, “Andrew Barton (Banjo) Paterson.”
32 Maras, Objectivity in Journalism, 23; Schudson, “The Objectivity Norm in American Journalism,” 167.
34 The Sydney Morning Herald, August 21, 1908, 4; The Argus, September 11, 1929, 5.
35 De Souza, “Cinesound Movietone Australian Newsreels.”
36 Young, Paper Emperors, 453.
37 Ricketson, “Newspaper Feature Writing,” 170.
39 Perkin, qtd. in Hurst, The Walkley Awards, 83–86.
40 Ricketson, “Newspaper Feature Writing in Australia,” 178.
42 Whitton, qtd. in Hurst, The Walkley Awards, 118.
44 Hurst, The Walkley Awards, 292.
45 Hurst, 292.
48 Ricketson, “Newspaper Feature Writing in Australia,” 181.
49 Ricketson, 183.
50 Inglis, Nation, 1; Ryan, “A Brief Tomorrow,” 87.
52 Ricketson, “Newspaper Feature Writing in Australia,” 169–70.
53 Ricketson, 170.
55 Ricketson, “Newspaper Feature Writing in Australia,” 176.
56 Interview on February 28, 1997, with Denis Muller, former editorial executive at The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age, qtd. in Ricketson, “Newspaper Feature Writing in Australia,” 176.
58 Ricketson, “Newspaper Feature Writing in Australia,” 172.
59 Quarterly Essay, “About.”
60 New Matilda, “Contact Us—About Us.”
61 Forde, “Closing the Eye,” 192, 201.
64 Hooper, 40.
65 Hooper, 53.
67 Lucashenko, 54.
69 Lucashenko, “Sinking Below Sight,” 53–67. It is worth noting that while Lucashenko’s story was a worthy winner of the 2013 Walkley Award for Print/Text Feature Writing Long (Over 4,000 words), Chloe Hooper’s outstanding profile of then Prime Minister Julia Gillard, written for The Monthly, was not nominated, a salient reminder that awards are a fallible measure of quality.
71 Toohey, 21–22.
73 Simons, “Do You Ever Think About Me?”
74 Foreign Press Association, “2019 FPA Awards Winners and Shortlists for Each Category.”
75 Simons, “Do You Ever Think About Me?”
76 Simons.
77 Giles, “The Magazine That Isn’t,” 8–11.
78 Lucas-Rowlands, “Margaret Simons, Author: ‘This is Home Now’: The Karen People’s Journey from Myanmar to Australia,” Longreads; Stevens, “Fenella Souter, Author: ‘What It’s Like to Drown,’” Longreads; Stevens, “Andrew McMillen, Author: ‘Giving the Ultimate Gift: Granting the Wish to Die at Home,’” Longreads. Editors of the Longreads aggregation site create posts that recommend stories to readers. All posts include the author’s name and a link to the original article. Some entries also include a Longreads editor’s byline and a brief description of the story. To avoid confusion, the aforementioned references are to the editors’ posts on the Longreads site. The publication details of the authors’ original articles are included under their names in the bibliography.
79 As above, the following references refer to Madeleine Watts’s entries on the Longform and Longreads aggregation sites: Longreads, “Madeleine Watts: ‘Leave No Trace’”; Longform, “Search: watts.” The Longform post provides a link to two original publications by Watts: Watts, “No Trace,” The Believer, April 2019; and Watts, “The Sunburnt Country: Whiteness as a Disease in a Skin-Cancer Ridden Australia,” The Believer, October 2018. The publication details of her original articles are also included under her name in the bibliography.
80 Simons, “The Karen Road to Nhill.”
81 Souter, “Drowning Statistics are a Deadly Reminder of Our Complicated Relationship with Water.”
82 McMillen, “Dying Wish: The Gift of Being Able to Die at Home.”
83 Watts, “Leave No Trace.”
84 The Walkley Foundation, “2019 Walkley Book Award Shortlisted Finalists Announced.”
85 The Walkley Foundation, “Walkley Winners Archive.”
86 Dowling, Immersive Longform Storytelling, 2.
87 See Branch, “Snow Fall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek”; and Viner, Glendinning, Pankhania, and Richards, “Firestorm.”
88 Viner, Glendinning, Pankhania, and Richards, “Firestorm.”
89 Reid, “How The Guardian Built Multimedia Interactive Firestorm.”
90 Reid.
93 Dwyer and Muller, “Fact Check: Is Australia’s Media Ownership Among the Highest in the World?”

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