

Arresting and Alliterative: Athens in the Antipodes

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Review of *Athens to Aotearoa: Greece and Rome in New Zealand Literature and Society*, edited by Diana Burton, Simon Perris and Jeff Tatum, Victoria University Press (2017)

Antipodean Antiquities: Classical Reception Down Under, edited by Marguerite Johnson, Bloomsbury (2019)

Half a century before Federation, Australia's first university — and indeed its first Chair of Classics — was established in Sydney and heraldically enshrined its mission to preserve northern intellectual traditions and values under southern skies. Its new coat of arms incorporated the lion of Cambridge and England and, in the centre of the Southern Cross, Oxford's open book. Acting Provost, Francis Merewether, nicknamed 'Futurity' for his visionary role in the university's foundation, proposed as its motto Horace's *coelum non animum mutant* ('they change their sky, not their mind'). When this was rejected, he devised *sidere mens eadem mutato*, which essentially means 'the same mind under a different constellation', or as alumnus Clive James quipped: 'Sydney University is really Oxford or Cambridge laterally displaced approximately twelve thousand miles'. From a 21st-century perspective, this motto, and the vision that inspired it, is a striking amalgam of chauvinism and aspiration. As such, it encapsulates certain inescapable issues and tensions that any student of Australasian Classical Reception must confront. Not least of these is geographic distance. To what extent has reception been about transplanting or literally 'translating' a European tradition. To

what extent has it entailed rebelling against that tradition or making it anew? And how should we address (and redress) past attempts to overwrite or classicize indigenous ancient cultures? As in other parts of the world, classical education in Australia and New Zealand remains by and large the preserve of a privileged few, but our responses to Graeco-Roman antiquity — in particular our creative responses — indicate a broader church. Again, Sydney University's own history is instructive. Enoch Powell, a brilliant Cambridge classicist, was appointed Professor of Greek at Sydney in 1937. One of his students was the young Gough Whitlam. Both men proudly carried their classical learning with them throughout their later political careers. Powell's infamous 'Rivers of Blood' speech on Britain's Race Relations Bill, in which he alluded to the Sibylline prophecy at *Aeneid* VI.87, *Thybrim multo spumantem sanguine cerno* ('I see the Tiber foaming with streams of blood'), led to his dismissal from the Conservative shadow cabinet. Whitlam, as Australia's 21st Prime Minister, dismantled the White Australia Policy and earned, in Noel Pearson's stirring eulogy, the epithet 'this Roman'. The climate is certainly ripe for a comprehensive analysis of Antipodean Classical Reception in all its complexity. Two recent volumes, with equally arresting and alliterative titles, endeavour both to celebrate and critique the classical tradition Down Under. They are *Athens to Aotearoa*, edited by Diana Burton, Simon Perris and Jeff Tatum, and *Antipodean Antiquities*, edited by Marguerite Johnson.

In any multi-contributor publication, where eclecticism reigns, the introduction is crucial in advancing — even if somewhat strainedly or speciously — an overarching thesis or design. The value and timeliness of Classical Reception Studies are not self-evident; a case needs to be made. Marguerite Johnson, in her introduction, fails to make such a case. No clear *raison d'être* emerges and there is little to excite a more general reader. Johnson's outline of the chapters that follow — and some of the chapters themselves — would warrant a place in Pseuds' Corner. By contrast, Simon Perris's introduction to *Athens to Aotearoa* is

mostly free of obfuscating jargon and plainly states the book's modest aims: to restart a conversation begun at a conference in Wellington in 2014 and to initiate a conversation 'which lasts beyond these pages' (p. 41). Perris helpfully provides a potted history of classical reception in New Zealand, with an emphasis on literary reception, and situates this, to a limited degree, within global trends. Both he and Johnson make valiant, if laboured, efforts to tackle up front the twin spectres of cultural cringe and colonial 'original sin'. But neither seems to have a bigger picture in view.

Athens to Aotearoa opens with illuminating personal reflections by four leading practitioners on their imaginative and sometimes uneasy engagement with Greece and Rome: Witi Ihimaera, the first published Māori novelist (and keynote speaker at the Wellington conference); author of young-adult fiction Karen Healey; poet Anna Jackson; and lithographer Marian Maguire. Ihimaera says he 'chose classical literature as Māori literature's analogue' at a time when he 'thought that Māori literature needed such a parallel for others to see its glory, its richness, its sovereign mana' (p. 60). Later he began a process of 'decolonizing' himself of classicist intentions, realizing there was no need for such an analogue, but nonetheless embracing the possibility of a mature and flourishing future relationship between Athens and Aotearoa. Jackson, who has given a lively and poignant voice to Clodia Metelli, the supposed *docta puella* ('learned girl') behind Catullus's Lesbia poems, makes a valuable general point in describing her individual experience of classical reception: 'My interest in the classics could be said [...] to involve the production of a cultural continuity, the continuation of an ongoing conversation in which one work responds to the work that has been written before' (p. 108).

The critical essays that follow these personal reflections are divided into four sections: Visual Arts (including television); Myths; Poets; and History and Society. One of the most cogent contributions is John Davidson's piece on Auckland-born poet R.

A. K. Mason and the significant presence of Latin poetry — particularly Horace — in his work, a presence often mediated through Edwardian classicist and poet A. E. Housman. Another is Peter Whiteford's sensitive reappraisal of Anna Seward's *Elegy on Captain Cook*, 'the first literary work in English explicitly to mention New Zealand' (p. 297) and the first to draw an explicit connection between Cook and Odysseus.

Antipodean Antiquities covers a similar if slightly wider range of topics. One notable difference is the inclusion of a section devoted to theatre, beginning with a lucid account by Laura Ginters of the origins of student drama at Sydney University and ending with Jane Montgomery Griffiths's 'unashamedly personal' (p. 97) tale of the extraordinary, and highly gendered, critical response to her 2015 adaptation of Sophocles' *Antigone* for Melbourne's Malthouse Theatre. Griffiths remarks that her own response to the critics provoked an online backlash 'that made Classical Reception Studies suddenly seem as current as Trumpian Twitter threads' (p. 89). There is inevitably some overlap in content between the two volumes but it escapes me why we need an essay in each that gives earnest theorizing attention to *Xena: Warrior Princess*, a cult television series filmed in New Zealand. Ika Willis, in a chapter uninvitingly titled 'Temporal Turbulence: Reception Studies(?) Now', observes '*Xena*'s presence in Classical scholarship is marginal, even in work that centres on popular culture and/or screen media' (p. 215). With good reason, I would venture. A much more satisfying exploration of popular fantasy adventure is Ann Rogerson's chapter on S. D. Gentill's *Hero Trilogy* which follows four young siblings whose 'story interweaves closely with ancient epic and tragedy, most notably Homer's *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid*'. As Rogerson points out, the themes of exile and displacement in the three novels have special resonance in an Australia still dealing with the consequences of post-war child migration schemes and the 'Stolen Generations'. Also concerned with the theme of displacement is Rachael White's interesting chapter on the perspectives of transported convicts.

White examines how, in the 19th century and in later fictional representations of the period, Australia was envisaged as an ancient underworld and the voyage from Britain as a kind of *katabasis* (descent).

Both volumes have undoubtedly opened a worthwhile discussion and raised pertinent questions. But what prevails is a sense of reticence. Marian Maguire says that through her artwork 'I find myself investigating questions then landing myself in other ones. Conclusions elude me' (p. 128). She is not alone. Where this important conversation should move next is towards a more coherent and meaningful investigation of classical influence, infiltration and impact in Australia and New Zealand, combining postcolonial circumspection with pioneering nerve — an investigation that risks conclusions and that dares to capture the imagination of a non-specialist audience.