The apparent resuscitation of Queensland print and literary culture in the decade after the fall of Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen in 1987 and the National Party in 1989 can be seen to be the product of three factors: an over-statement of the dereliction of literary life in Queensland under Bjelke-Petersen, and perhaps a corresponding overstated case for its contemporary recovery; the effectiveness of government and institutional mechanisms of support; and the professional development and networking of writers and other print culture agents. Together, these factors have contributed to a transformation of the profile and scale of literary activity in Queensland and to a renegotiation of the place of Queensland literature in the national context.

Over the past two decades, Queensland literary culture has done much to recover from the impact of the premiership of Joh Bjelke-Petersen (1968–87) and of the Country Party and National Party governments of 1957–89. Most accounts of Bjelke-Petersen’s premiership characterise the period as marked by the evacuation of writers and the ‘literary’ from the state. The accuracy of these accounts is open to debate, but the period since 1990 is often presented as a time of cultural resuscitation, marked by the revival of Queensland literary culture locally and a renegotiation of its place in the national literature. This change has been so complete – or at least so exciting to the locals – that by 5 September 2002, the following news item could appear on page eight of the giveaway weekly City News:

**Nick on Move:** Top Brissie author and tourism icon Nick Earls had somewhere better to watch the fireworks on Saturday than South Bank. The writer was spotted walking across the Victoria Bridge about an hour before the start. (2002: 8)

A few months before this sighting, the Queensland Writers Centre circulated an email that in part read: ‘Please join us in welcoming John Birmingham back
to Brisbane … Celebrations start 5pm at Verve Bar and Restaurant, Metro Arts Basement, 109 Edward Street. Thursday 9 May.’ (Queensland Writers Centre 2002) By 2002, after two or more decades of departures, a party was now held to welcome gonzo writer John Birmingham back to the city that he had fled ten years earlier, and Queensland’s relations with its writers had changed sufficiently that it could now be news when a local novelist watched the Riverfire event from the Victoria Bridge.

The nature of, and the reasons for, this transformation reveal something of the complexity of the institution of literature or print culture. While media accounts have tended to focus on the successes of a small number of individual writers and texts, the change in the relations between the city/state and the literary seems as much to follow from institutional changes as the emergence of individual voices in Queensland print culture – as well as its function within the national literature or print culture – is the product of multiple forces and agents. In this instance, the transformation in Queensland’s literary culture can be seen to be a product of three forces: the partial ‘statefication’ and reorganisation of local literary activity; the development of national networks and new professional practices; and the mobilisation of new cultural and literary narratives about Queensland, in which the literary is utilised by government and the community as a symbolic commodity. A rehearsal of the narratives about Queensland literature and of the recent history of the development of print culture within the state establishes something of the interplay between individual, institutional and narrative agency in the reshaping of Queensland literature, both locally and within the national literature.

Change – or Just Narratives of Change?

The pervasive narratives of the decline of the state’s literary life in the 1970s and 1980s complicate any examination of the transformation of Queensland literature. Often, as in the case of Gerard Lee (2002), the city of Brisbane and the state of Queensland are presented as places inhospitable to writers:

I can only imagine what David Malouf, Rodney Hall and Tom Shapcott must have endured growing up [here] as kids during the war and as teenagers during the fifties. They seem to have brought poems out of the dead land. (2002: 62)

Steven Herrick went even further, suggesting that Brisbane was synonymous with anonymous development and cultural erasure:

A great little city, Dallas of the South, Johannesburg of the East, Bhopla of the West and Antarctica of the North, with no history, less architecture and a penchant for selling to the highest bidder. (quoted in Sheahan-Bright and Glover 2002: xx)

For Ross Fitzgerald, writing in the early 1980s at the apogee of political and cultural conservatism, and following the departures of (among others) David Malouf,
Queensland Literary Culture in the Long Decade After Joh

Thea Astley, William Yang, Susan Johnson, Robyn Davidson, Tom Shapcott, Gerard Lee and Rodney Hall, the outcome was dire:

Remarkably few novelists, poets and dramatists … remain in the state. [Only] David Rowbotham, literary editor of Brisbane’s Courier-Mail, the elderly Xavier Herbert in north Queensland, Nancy Cato at Noosa and the poet Bruce Dawe at Toowoomba remain in the cultural wasteland that is Queensland. (1984: 633–34)

Most dramatically, Gerard Lee suggested that some writers who did not leave Joh’s Queensland risked settling into such a despondent state that suicide was the only way out – naming lost young writers Ian Roberts, Eugene Schmetzer and Salvatore Esposito (2002: 67). It seems important to be mindful that Romantic and anti-Romantic mythologies are in play here: writers as hypersensitive sufferers; alienation as a catalyst for creativity; Queensland as a cultural vacuum; and Brisbane as a hick town.

Perhaps importantly, most of these negative and even destructive accounts of Queensland’s literary and cultural life come from writers who left the state. They can, in some measure at least, be balanced against the views of some those who stayed. Mary-Rose MacColl argues that the state had always been a fertile breeding ground for writers: ‘Queensland grew or imported so many writers … they should make us eat them so we’d know they tasted the same as us.’ (2002: 20) And while many left, many also stayed. Joan Priest, in her memoir of Queensland cultural life from the 1950s to the 1990s, The Literary Precipice, portrays Brisbane’s small but active literary community. It was not quite the pre-war Brisbane of Jack Lindsay and Brian Penton, but it did have life in it. As Don Munro comments in the book, ‘nobody talked about Brisbane being a cultural desert … it was something dreamed up by journalists from elsewhere’ (quoted in Priest 1998: 17).

By the 1970s, the city’s literary activity was organised around a number of enterprises, particularly poetry publishing. Makar Press, Jacaranda Press and University of Queensland Press (UQP) drew on a local poetry scene that had been active since the 1960s, and featured a number of important Australian poets: Judith Wright, John Blight, Rodney Hall, David Malouf, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Judith Rodriguez, David Rowbotham, Bruce Dawe and, into the 1970s, Michael Sariban, Manfred Jurgensen and Philip Neilsen. From the early 1960s, the annual Warana Writers’ Weekend gathered local figures associated with the Fellowship of Australian Writers, like Joan Priest and poet Maureen Freer, along with national writers (Hal Porter, A.D. Hope) and the occasional international (Allan Ginsberg). The University of Queensland itself provided refuge to a number of important figures: Judith Wright was the university statistician, while Val Vallis, David Rowbotham and David Malouf taught at different times in the English Department.

The healthy local poetry scene was not, however, a complete compensation for Brisbane’s distance from the small but developing national literary media and publishing infrastructure, nor for the persistent difficulty local writers faced in securing Literature Board funding. While Oodgeroo Noonucal and Xavier Herbert
were Queensland-based national figures who departed from the mainstream of the national literature, the Queensland literary scene largely lacked institutional organisation. At best, the state maintained an interesting but provincial literature that struggled to have any national or international impact.

Beyond the infrastructural limitations, the political ones were significant. Ross Fitzgerald (1984) argues that indirect censorship – hostile intervention in journalism, and secondary and tertiary education curricula – and the direct censorship of film, theatre and literature maintained a climate of cultural oppression. Direct censorship, marked from 1954 and becoming worse after 1972, targeted works from elsewhere but actually saw comparatively few Queensland-generated works banned. Some institutions, such as the State Library of Queensland, in its shredding of books of Robert Mapplethorpe photographs in the mid-1980s, responded to the climate of oppression with embarrassingly compliant acts of self-censorship. Oddly, a number of important books (including Madonna’s *Sex* and Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*) remain banned in Queensland.

While Fitzgerald himself has written about the legal difficulties of writing contemporary history in Queensland (Fitzgerald and Dickie 1989), the hostile political climate did have some paradoxical effects. The political turn in the work of Queensland writers such as Errol O’Neill, Ralph Summy, Barry O’Donoghue and Tom Shapcott (who was yet to depart) seemed fuelled by the counter-cultural and youth-cultural movements being drawn into conflict with the Bjelke-Petersen regime. Gerard Lee has stated that art as subversive action was his starting point for being a writer in Queensland in the 1970s, even though his work dwelt on personal or sexual politics (2002: 65). The political agenda of other artists – the Poets Union; radical poets like John Manifold, Matt Foley and Oodgeroo; the street press newspaper *Cane Toad Times*; and the proto-punk band The Saints – was more naked.

In some sense, the choice to stay or to go was both political and professional. After 1970, as the national literary infrastructure developed and the Literature Board was established, it was not just politics but money that drove writers from the state. Some departed writers flourished: Tom Shapcott, David Malouf, Robyn Davidson, Thea Astley and Janette Turner Hospital. Staying in Queensland usually meant limiting one’s professional opportunities. Most Brisbane-based writers throughout the 1970s and 1980s were all but invisible. Hugh Lunn, Bruce Dawe, Bill Scott and Gary Crew received some acknowledgement and fashioned careers here, but several worthy writers – David Rowbotham, Philip Neilsen, Errol O’Neill and Henry Reynolds among them – laboured here without recognition, either within or outside the state. Unhappily, a lack of freelance journalism opportunities, a shortage of publishing houses, the absence of any film and television infrastructure, and the blindness of both the local and national media to Queensland writers limited the processes of professionalism that were underway in Sydney and Melbourne. Local writers’ work circulated only within small local communities and without much acknowledgement. As John Birmingham noted, ‘nobody cares about your cred in Brisbane, because nobody has any of their own’ (1994: 154).
Institutional Change

In contrast to the previous twenty years, the 1990s was a decade of real literary development. The fall of the National Party government in 1989 brought with it an escalation of Queensland literary activity supported by government, local literary organisations and the commitment of individual writers. The apparatus of each of the areas of literary advocacy, professional development, textual production, textual development (local, national and international), publication and networking, book circulation and promotion was transformed. These transformations were linked to specific cultural, political and institutional transformations in Queensland – Mary-Rose MacColl likens it to the effect of ethylene in accelerating the ripening of fruit (2002: 29) – but they were also part of national and global transformations in the function of literary markets, the production and mediation of authorial identity, the operation of publishing houses and the organisation of literary institutions.

The acceleration in the development of the state’s literary culture was supported by the transformation of government literary policy. In 1991, Premier Wayne Goss – then also Arts Minister – released the Arts Review Committee’s Queensland: A State for the Arts report on arts funding and policy. The report restructured the state government arts funding apparatus on a mini-Australia Council model through the introduction of peer assessment; a progressive, diverse development agenda; funding for individual artists (as a corrective to the low number of grants from the Australia Council achieved by Queenslanders); and faux-arm’s length funding (Glover and Cunningham 2003). The report recognised the need for funding for writing alongside visual arts, regional arts development and Indigenous arts:

Submissions … referred to the difficulty of being a writer in Queensland. It is possible for only a few to contemplate working full-time as a writer and expect to earn a reasonable living. (Queensland Arts Committee 1991)

Before Goss, support for writing was less than $100,000 per year. In 1990, funding went to the Writers’ Train, to the publication of the Queensland Writer magazine (which would be closed down soon after), to a part-time Literature Officer position, to the recently established Imago magazine, to Warana Writers’ Week, and to the establishment of the Queensland Writers Centre. State government funding for writing grew quickly through the early 1990s to $657,000 by 1994 and nearly $1 million (across government) by 2000, not counting the $30 million state government funding for the state library and the public library service.1 This $1 million was made up of funding to individual writers, writing organisations, writers’ festivals and events, publishers, small magazines and – by 1999 – the Premier’s Literary Awards. By the end of the decade, Queensland had the highest levels of literature funding of any state.

Initially, large amounts of funding went to individual writers. In 1993, more than $300,000 – including grants for ten poets – was provided. The low tangible outcomes of these programs meant that by the mid-1990s support was focused on more established writers and ‘surer bets’, such as Gary Crew and Venero Armanno,
who were likely to produce a novel that would be published. In 2000, however, the grants schemes were further reviewed and small-grant funding swung back to emerging writers. The individual grants were a site of regular political and media controversy. In the first round of funding in 1992, a $30,000 fellowship was given to Hugh Lunn. Jack Lunn, the editor of the *Courier-Mail*, denounced his brother and the program in the paper. It was Helen Darville, however, who created the greatest stir for her receipt in 1994 of $13,500 towards the writing of a novel about an abduction on Brisbane’s Southside. The *Courier-Mail*, after a freedom of information submission, revealed that Darville, in making her application as Helen Demidenko, claimed Ukrainian parentage. Questions in parliament followed, with Arts Minister Matt Foley defending the grant on the basis that:

The panel considered a sample of Ms Darville’s work, her resume and the awards she had won in assessing the literary merit of her application. As to the information concerning the applicant’s ethnic background, this was accepted on its face in the absence of any evidence to the contrary at the time. The Chair of the Writing Assessment panel, Professor Graeme Turner, has subsequently confirmed … that: ‘whilst her [Ms Darville’s] nomination of herself as a person of non-English speaking background was noted by the panel, the over-riding criteria for the panel was artistic merit and the track record of the author as demonstrated by her recent success in achieving publication of her work, supportive critical reviews and awards for her writing. The panel’s view was that Helen was the outstanding emerging writer in that round.’ (*Hansard* 1995)

Aside from these controversies, funding for individuals proved vital to the development of a generation of writers, and even to the delivery of particular projects – for example, Nick Earls’ *Zigzag Street* was written while on an Arts Queensland grant.

In addition to grants for individual writers, the Queensland government provided for the development of infrastructure through financial and policy support. When the decade began, there was little permanent infrastructure aside from UQP. The press received $15,000 from the Arts Division for the staging of the David Unaipon Prize, which Mary-Rose MacColl suggests was the ‘single most important initiative in the development of Queensland writing’ (2002: 23). It also maintained – mainly through Australia Council subsidy – a modest Queensland focus to its publishing program, including publishing Angelika Fremd, Hugh Lunn, Nick Earls, Venero Armanno, Matthew Condon, Janette Turner Hospital, John Blight, David Malouf, Gerard Lee, Mabel Edmond, Sue Gough and Herb Wharton. While UQP remains central to the sustenance of the state’s literary activity, from the early 1990s its infrastructural role was shared by a range of new or reinvented organisations: the Queensland Writers Centre Association, the Brisbane Writers Festival, Central Queensland University Press, Somerset Literature Festival, Voices on the Coast, Playlab, Interplay, (passingly) the Queensland Poetry Festival and, from 2001, the Festival of Ideas.
In the 1990s, as writing infrastructure was transformed, and the visibility and success of Queensland’s writers magnified, the Literature Board of the Australia Council seemed to have suspiciously little to do with it. Literature Board funding to Queensland remained disquietingly low. While reactionary critics like Gerard Ross (1997: 8) have defended the low returns to the state, others have taken strong action against the board. In 1993, Robert Hughes of the Queensland Poets’ Association began a campaign against low levels of Literature Board funding compared with other states. The Board responded by holding a meeting in Queensland and producing figures which consistently indicated that Queensland writers, when they applied, were successful at a higher rate than the national average; it was just that they rarely applied. Ironically, the biggest year of individual funding to Queensland writers – 1994, in which thirteen grants out of 90 nationally were awarded to writers in the state – followed a campaign by Arts Queensland to increase levels of application to their federal counterparts. Perhaps more important was the Board’s consistent support of University of Queensland Press through publishing grants for new fiction and poetry, and small but consistent amounts of support for the Queensland Writers Centre and the Brisbane Writers Festival. By 2002, Queensland application levels to the Australia Council overall remained so low, and state government criticism of the federal funding body was so persistent, that a council position was created in Brisbane in order to address the problem.

The endpoint of this reinvention of government’s relationship with literature was the establishment of the Queensland Premier’s Literary Awards. This $150,000 suite of awards, alongside the existing Steele Rudd Award for Fiction and the Unaipon Award for unpublished Indigenous writing, was the most generous of its kind in Australia. In Parliament, the Premier claimed:

The midnight oil is being burned in hundreds of homes around Queensland and the sound of keyboards being pounded can be heard across the state as authors polish their manuscripts in the hope of realising their dreams. (Queensland. Legislative Assembly 2001)

The awards, together with the establishment of the Brisbane Institute, the Festival of Ideas and the Courier-Mail $30,000 Book of the Year Award for a book stimulating public debate, represented overt attempts to create a space for the circulation and contest of public ideas – government sponsorship for the creation of a public sphere. This seemed to follow from Queensland’s marginalisation within national public debates; it was decided that the lack of scale, adventurousness and diversity in the local media demanded greater state action. The most peculiar of these paradoxical state interventions to create a space for ‘free’ ideas is the Queensland government’s prize for playwriting – a state-sponsored award for playwrights to produce work about Queensland public life. It was a clear departure from the censorious culture and censorship legislation of the Bjelke-Petersen years.

Beyond government, the Queensland Writers Centre has been integral to the organisation and promotion of writing within the state since its establishment in 1990. Formed out of two years’ work by a steering committee representing long-
standing writers’ groups, the QWC was a response to the venue problems of the Queensland branch of the Fellowship of Australian Writers and to the shared interest of government and writers in an advocacy organisation for the sector. Founding Chair Craig Munro promised a representative organisation, in which:

no form of writing is excluded and none is given favoured status. Poets, children’s writers, playwrights, story tellers, novelists, journalists, community writers, family historians, screen, radio and song writers, commentators are all welcome – along with others exploring new and previously uncharted areas of literary creativity (Munro, quoted in Beaton 1999: 20).

Initial funding from the Arts Division was $25,000, with $40,000 coming from the Literature Board. This was enough for the centre to open its doors and employ a coordinator, Robyn Sheahan (later Sheahan-Bright), from January 1991. While the QWC membership grew quickly from 120 at the founding annual general meeting in 1990 to 1500 in 1994 (Beaton 1999: 20), the Centre never met the aim of representing all types of writers. The pre-existence of Playlab (for playwrights), the Australian Writers’ Guild (catering for screenwriters), the Australian Society of Authors (for prose writers) and the establishment in 1992 of the Queensland Poets’ Association meant that QWC tended to focus on the needs of hobbyist and semi-professional prose writers. While popular in Brisbane, the Centre faced difficulty delivering significant services to regional Queensland.

Despite these problems, and its limited resources, under Robyn Sheahan-Bright’s leadership the QWC became the largest and most successful writers’ centre in the country. It provided a focal point for industry advocacy, advice to government, non-tertiary-based training and professional development, job referral services, writer promotion, general information and, most importantly, an esprit de corps. From 1997, under Hilary Beaton’s directorship – and with greater pressure on funds – the Centre corporatised its services and focused on marketing the state’s writers. The QWC, particularly after moving into its Metro Arts Building premises in 1999, became less accessible as a physical centre for writers and more a fee-for-service deliverer. These services became more professionalised and, as typified by the annual Wordpool public reading program, better marketed. Along with the transformed interest of the local media in writers, and the reinvented Brisbane Writers Festival, the QWC propelled writers into the public mind.

While being the progeny of several other writing organisations, the QWC was to outgrow all and outlast several. The Queensland Poets’ Association folded in 1994 after its state government funding was withdrawn, while the Fellowship of Australian Writers (Qld), the Society of Women Writers (Qld), the Australian Writers’ and Artists’ Guild, and the Multicultural Writers were to struggle on before folding. Playlab established permanent staff and premises in the mid-1990s after receiving operational funding from Arts Queensland. However, by the end of the decade – despite new ventures such as the Fantastic Queensland fantasy-writing cluster – the QWC, with 2000 members and an annual turnover of $600,000, remained the key service deliverer and facilitator of development in the landscape.
Queensland universities had long offered individual units in creative writing, but from 1994 the University of Queensland offered the state’s first degree award in creative writing (Master of Arts in Creative Writing). QUT and Griffith University followed soon afterwards, including undergraduate courses. These developments, prompted by student demand and the wholesale expansion in creative writing courses elsewhere, drew some criticism for fostering ‘sameness’ (Wilson 2000: 10–13), but were remarkably successful in identifying promising new writers such as Mary-Rose MacColl, R.D. Lappan, Kim Wilkins, Komninos Zervos, Ingrid Woodrow and Alasdair Duncan. In the cases of Bronwyn Lea, Nike Bourke, Nerida Newton and Venero Armanno, they helped to produce prize-winning work.

In a wider sense, the programs were part of a process of clearing pathways to professionalism for Queensland writers: short and degree courses, writing grants, literary prizes (including the Premier’s Literary Awards, the Arts Minister’s prizes for poetry and short fiction, the State Library of Queensland’s Young Writers Award and the Somerset College prizes), Queensland-centric publishing efforts by UQP, the establishment of local literary agents and stronger connections to literary agents and publishers elsewhere. In the early and mid-1990s, the Vogel Award was important in changing the profile of Queensland writing, with three winners from the state in four years.

In the early and mid-1990s, a number of the successful younger writers (including Armanno, McGahan, Earls and MacColl) made professional and personal links with the ‘black pack’ of younger publishers and agents who came to dominate senior positions in publishing houses during the decade (including Jane Palfreyman, Fiona Inglis, Sophie Cunningham and Clare Forster). Inglis, for example, who joined Curtis Brown as an agent following a career at Allen & Unwin, signed McGahan in 1994, Earls in 1996 and Armanno subsequently. By the end of the decade, the links to southern publishing houses and agents, and the emergence of local literary agents such as Margaret Kennedy, made launching a literary career from Queensland unexceptional. By the early new millennium, writers who had left – like John Birmingham, Matthew Condon, Gerard Lee and David Malouf (based from time to time at the Gold Coast) – had begun to return from self-imposed exile.

The publishing sector itself remained small in Queensland. University of Queensland Press had mixed fortunes throughout the decade. During the salad days of the late 1980s and early 1990s, flush with the success of Peter Carey’s first Booker Prize win and Hugh Lunn’s bestsellers, UQP was publishing upwards of 90 titles a year. By mid-decade, this number had contracted to fewer than 50 titles, before recovering by the close of the decade. The press – although of significant size for an Australian-owned publisher (perhaps only Allen & Unwin, Lothian and Lonely Planet were bigger) – remained only medium-sized compared with the multinationals that dominated the market: Penguin, Random House, Pan Macmillan, and HarperCollins. At the same time, UQP continued to pioneer new areas of Australian writing. In the 1970s it was literary fiction; in the 1980s young adult fiction; and in the 1990s the press continued to expand its list of Queensland writers and became the largest publisher of Indigenous writing. In contrast, Jacaranda Wiley shrunk its commitment to the general publishing of Queensland work. While
predominantly an educational press since its establishment in 1954, Jacaranda had been the first publisher to release work by Kath Walker (Oodgeroo Noonuccal) in the early 1960s and had continued to publish some Australian poetry. By the early 1990s, this activity had ceased and by the close of the decade the name ‘Jacaranda’ had become only an imprint following the gradual takeover of the house by the American-owned publisher John Wiley & Sons. Wiley did, however, contribute in other ways as the largest employer of editors in Queensland, as a pioneer of web-based teaching texts, and through Managing Director Peter Donoughue’s term as president of the Australian Publishers’ Association.

Otherwise, small press publishing stayed small. Central Queensland University Press established itself with state government support in 1993, about the time that University of Southern Queensland Press severely contracted. A number of small-enterprise presses were founded, including David Reiter’s Interactive Publications. LiNQ was long established at James Cook University, but most universities produced literary journals: Coppertales at University of Southern Queensland, Idiom 23 at Central Queensland University and Imago at QUT. By the end of the decade, however, most were producing spasmodic rather than regular issues. In a sign of the times, in 2002 Imago folded into the Queensland University of Technology’s online literary journal dotlit.

Narratives of Change: Queensland Literature and the Media

While linked to the other constitutive changes in Queensland print culture, the change in the media representation of Queensland literature and writers is significant on its own. Figures such as David Rowbotham, as Literary Editor of the Courier-Mail, ensured some coverage of the work and careers of Queensland writers in the Bjelke-Petersen years, but in the 1990s this coverage began to move out of the book pages and into the news and lifestyle pages of the paper. In part, this reflected the new success Queensland writers were enjoying within the national and international literary and media spheres: three Vogel winners (Andrew McGahan, Darren Williams and Helen Darville); four Miles Franklin successes (Thea Astley, Rodney Hall, David Malouf and Helen Darville); David Malouf as inaugural winner of the Impac Prize (the world’s biggest literary prize); the sexual fetishisation of Venero Armanno in the national media (including making Who magazine’s ‘25 Most Beautiful People’ list, the Rolling Stone Hot Issue); and the cult successes with the new 20- to 35-year-old readership of John Birmingham, Andrew McGahan and Nick Earls. Despite the subsequent achievements of others, such as Kim Wilkins, Mary-Rose MacColl, Rebecca Sparrow, James Maloney and Jay Verney, the gaze tended to fall on Earls, Armanno, Birmingham and McGahan as a key group – with Darville/Demidenko as a special case.

Most noticeably, lifestyle newspapers like the Brisbane News now deploy writers and the literary alongside the coffeehouse as tropes of Brisbane’s cosmopolitanism, central to its cultural rebranding. These narratives of literary success and change have become entwined with, and employed in, the generation of a wider set of narratives about Brisbane’s and Queensland’s maturation and development. A new
city/state identity has written over, or at least contests, older images of Queensland that are still active. As the Hansen moment reminded us, Queensland is often still seen – particularly from the outside – as a politically conservative, racially intolerant cultural wasteland. However, narratives of Brisbane’s post-Expo cosmopolitanism are increasingly dominant. An issue of Black+White magazine carried a now familiar ‘Viva BrisVegas’ story (Dent 2002: 32–37). The image of a culturally resurgent and transformed Brisbane was championed locally – sometimes with crowing delight, sometimes with awkward self-consciousness, and sometimes ironically as in the celebratory but self-deprecating term ‘BrisVegas’. A high point was the Courier-Mail’s coverage of Helen Demidenko’s 1995 Miles Franklin win, with David Bentley claiming the win ‘quash(ed) any lingering perceptions of Brisbane as a literary backwater’ (Bentley 1995: 1). Helen Darville subsequently undid the Courier-Mail when she published plagiarised material in its pages.

By the end of the 1990s, the perceptions of Brisbane as a cultural wasteland had begun to recede. Instead, the city’s writers and their narrative of a new Brisbane were tightly bound into the remaking of the city through narratives of a contemporary Brisbane. The Queensland or Brisbane writer, of a certain order

The local media found a willing and able literary trump card in Nick Earls’ personality-centred strategies of literary celebrity-making and bittersweet narratives of a changing Brisbane. Earls’ documentation of the new rituals of house renovation, cosmopolitan food outlets, the sexual lives of city professionals and the inner urban lifestyle of Brisbane’s western suburbs connected Brisbane to the inner cities of other metropolises across the Western world. Brisbane was no longer defined by its difference from elsewhere, but rather by the continuities between the lives of young people in the work of Birmingham, McGahan and Earls and the lives of those elsewhere.

A Writers’ City

Rosa Praed and P.L. Travers (the author of Mary Poppins) were perhaps Queensland’s first international best-selling writers. In the 1930s, Steele Rudd dominated the Australian market. Successful Queensland writers are not a new phenomenon, but following the momentous institutional development of the 1990s, it is doubtful whether there has ever been a better time to be a writer in Queensland. The confluence of government policy, increased access to markets and heightened public interest manifests itself as greater opportunity. Likewise, as Mary-Rose MacColl notes, there is an acceptance of a new diversity visible (and publicised) within the Queensland writing community (2002: 29). Earlier non-English speaking background writers (David Malouf, Angelika Fremd, Michael Sariban and Manfred Jurgensen) were linked to high modernism and the fortification of a Eurocentric-Australian canon, which seemed to increase resistance to their work by the mass
media. More recent non-English speaking background writers (Venero Armanno, Komninos, Lau Siew Mei, Tony Maniaty, Sang Ye, Mabel Edmond and Lorena Sun Butcher), and particularly Indigenous writers (Vivienne Cleven, Sam Watson Jnr, Sam Wagan Watson, Herb Wharton, Leah Purcell, Deborah Mailman, Wesley Enoch, Jackie Huggins, Noel Pearson, Melissa Lucashenko, Wayne Coolwell, Alexis Wright and the late Lisa Belllear), have been party to, and the beneficiaries of, a converse attempt to dislodge this canon and admit a range of new Australian voices.

Conclusion

The late 1980s and 1990s proved to be a long decade of change. In the same way that national institutional change in the 1960s paved the way for the achievements of Australian literature in the 1970s, in Queensland both institutional developments and the promulgation of narratives of cultural change supported real literary development in the 1990s and early twenty-first century.

While Australian literary culture remained largely organised around Sydney and Melbourne – as these cities were, and are, home to the major publishing houses and the literary media – the Queensland government acted through institutions and NGOs such as the Queensland Writers Centre and UQP to support rather than restrain literary activity. And, while Queensland writers and the Queensland public sphere of ideas and culture still suffered for the modest size of the local community and the media both worked to represent a narrative of cultural change. By the turn of the millennium, Queensland – while continuing to trade on, as well as be marginalised by, difference and distance – had edged closer to the centre of the map of Australian literature. In some sense, literary policy had worked. It set the scene for even greater development in the first decade of the twenty-first century, wherein autonomous market forces and a generation of writers who had grown up after the Bjelke-Petersen era would swing into action.

Notes

1 These figures come from my own experience as Manager for Writing and Publishing at Arts Queensland, 1992–96.

2 In 2002, Brisbane Marketing launched a television and print media campaign using Nick Earls as the face of the city. In some sense, Clem Christesen, the founder of Meanjin, performed a similar role at an earlier time: in 1935 he was employed by the Queensland Government Tourist Bureau as Literary Publicity Officer.
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