Thea Astley (1925-2004), more than any other novelist, has put Queensland on the map – especially the tropical North. Almost all her sixteen titles are set in this state, of which she once wrote, ‘Queensland is where the tall yarn happens, acted out on a stage where, despite its vastness, the oddballs see and recognise each other’. She was born and raised in Brisbane, where her father was a journalist. She attended All Hallows Convent and The University of Queensland, where she graduated Bachelor of Arts in 1948. For the next twenty years she worked as a school teacher, and between 1967 and 1979 she taught in the English Department at Macquarie University. Her first novel, Girl with a Monkey, appeared in 1958, and from then on she produced a novel or short story collection every two years or so. After retirement from teaching, she lived for several years in Kuranda, outside Cairns, before moving back to New South Wales to the South Coast.

Wherever she lived, Queensland remained the heartland of her fiction, from suburban Brisbane around 1960 in Slow Natives (1965) to the Far North settings of the stories in Hunting the Wild Pineapple (1979) and It’s Raining in Mango (1987) and dying small-towns like Drylands (1999). More than a regional novelist, Astley was recognised as one of the leading Australian modernist fiction writers of her generation, alongside Patrick White and Hal Porter. She won the prestigious Miles Franklin Prize no less than four times. Yet there is no extended study of her art in existence.
(although there is a biography in preparation). The collection of critical essays on her work, plus an interview and several essays by Astley, which Paul Genoni and I edited (Thea Astley’s Fictional Worlds) was the first book on Astley’s work to be published, as recently as 2006. This anomaly should surely be remedied, and the Thea Astley papers held in the Fryer Library offer a rich resource from which to begin such a study.

Ever the professional writer, during her lifetime Astley deposited 17 boxes of material, consisting of handwritten and typescript drafts of 11 of her books, from the first (Girl with a Monkey) to The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow (1996). These manuscripts have accompanying notes by the author. Many of them also include correspondence with editors and publishers, and background research material. In some cases there are overseas editions of the novels. There are draft manuscripts of short stories and articles or talks, and a few unpublished manuscripts. Notebooks contain handwritten drafts of prose and poems, some of which date from the 1940s when she was a member of the Barjai group in Brisbane.

The Fryer Library recently acquired an additional six boxes of material from Thea Astley’s estate. They include successive drafts of several more of her works, and a significant amount of biographical material in the form of correspondence. I recently had the pleasure of looking through this new material.

Of literary manuscripts, there are drafts of An Item from the Late News (published in 1982 but not represented in the earlier acquisition) and the original handwritten draft of Drylands, plus edited drafts of this novel: there is rich material here for a study of the evolution of this, her last novel. There are also drafts of various sketches, talks and short stories (her Collected Stories were published in 1997).

The correspondence is largely literary, consisting of letters and cards from other writers, and from editors and agents. These include Beatrice Davis’s first letter, inviting Thea to visit her at Angus and Robertson’s to talk about the manuscript of Girl with a Monkey: ‘This piece is rather too slight, but I believe you could become a very good novelist indeed.’ There are letters and postcards from Patrick White over the years 1960 to 1963, when they were friends in Sydney. A small collection of her books includes two of his novels and Selected Writings of Gérard de Nerval inscribed to her by Patrick White. His letters include severe criticism of one of her manuscripts entitled ‘The Little Lie’ (1961), despite the fact that Angus and Robertson wanted to publish it. A question for literary sleuths – was this novel in fact never published, or did it transmute into her third novel, The Well Dressed Explorer?

The correspondence files also offer some insights into Thea Astley’s family of origin – letters from her father and mother, and from her brother Philip, who became a Jesuit priest. There is also material by and about Philip, who died in 1997. There are some 20 letters from her husband, Jack Gregson, most of them written from Europe where he went travelling alone in 1975, and a few cards and letters from Thea to members of her family. There is a folder of material about Thea’s paternal grandfather, Charles Astley, who taught art at Toowoomba and Warwick in the early years of the twentieth century.

A folder of publishing contracts also contains speaking invitations with associated correspondence. There are folders of newspaper cuttings and reviews, not in any particular order, but including some of the American ones which would be difficult to access otherwise; perhaps they indicate the reviews Astley was willing to keep.

One box contains all the awards Astley won, literary and civil, as well as her Bachelor of Arts certificate from The University of Queensland. Finally, an unusual holding – two Hermes typewriters (which Thea used to refer to as ‘typers’), one a present from her...
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This additional acquisition makes the Fryer collection of Astley papers the most extensive in the country. As a collection, it is exceptionally strong in holdings of successive drafts and proof copies of her novels. Apart from the drafts of *The Well Dressed Explorer* (her third novel) and *The Acolyte* (her sixth), which are held in the National Library, the Fryer collection of Astley’s papers holds all the crucial material for a study of the processes of composition of her novels (the only novel not represented at all in the archives seems to be *A Boat Load of Home Folk*, her fifth novel).

While this kind of study is most urgently needed, there is also material from which to begin an investigation into her relations with publishers, which would in turn provide insights into conditions of publication for fiction writers in Australia over the period of her career. As well as the early poems included in this collection, the Fryer also holds a small collection of poems she published in the school magazine – the makings perhaps for a collection of her poetry. It is to be hoped that literary researchers will quickly take up the opportunity to work with this rich collection.

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