Queensland man of letters: The many worlds of F.W. Robinson

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Abstract

This article offers the fullest discussion to date of the career, achievements and writing of Associate Professor Frederick Walter Robinson, one of the founders of the English program at the University of Queensland and a major figure in Brisbane and Queensland cultural life from the 1920s to the 1960s. Robinson’s career is considered in the context of the development of English as a university and school discipline, the intellectual and cultural life of Brisbane and the University of Queensland, and national cultural developments during the middle decades of the twentieth century. Through his university teaching and vigorous participation in many cultural and educational groups within and outside the university, Robinson was a highly influential figure — particularly in his pioneering work in teaching, documenting and researching Australian literature, developing the Queensland school curriculum in English and championing the importance of Aboriginal anthropology. The article makes use of unpublished material in Robinson’s extensive papers in the Fryer Library, and suggests that a true estimation of Robinson’s achievements has been hindered by the fact that so much of his work remains unpublished.

Queensland cultural life, like Queensland politics, has often been dominated by powerful and charismatic individuals. In the case of Frederick Walter Robinson, one of the founders of the English program at the University of Queensland and a prominent figure at the university and in Brisbane cultural circles from the 1920s to the 1960s, a charismatic personality and wide-ranging cultural interests were wedded to the then powerful authority of a senior university post.

To many of his students — such as the young David Malouf in the early 1950s — Robinson offered an exciting induction into culture as ‘a strongly felt totality of experience’, finding unexpected connections between the canonical literary texts that were the ostensible subject of his lectures, the contemporary Australian reality and eclectic bits of knowledge and experience such as Robinson’s personal memories of the 1914–18 war and Aboriginal anthropology. But Robinson’s influence also extended far beyond the university — through his contributions to the development of English in Queensland secondary schools, through his role as a cultural advocate and organiser in numerous societies and public forums, and through his participation in national cultural networks during the decades that were critical
for developing notions of a distinctively Australian literature and culture. As the founder of the Fryer Library at the University of Queensland, Robinson’s legacy also continues in an institution that has become, after the Australian National Library, the most important repository of material for the study of Australian literature.

Given that Robinson was perhaps Queensland’s most prominent early teacher and scholar of English, it is notable that he did not come to live in Queensland until his mid-thirties, and that his initial training was not primarily in English. Robinson was born in 1888 in Sydney, with his stellar academic career starting at high school. As a sixteen-year-old student in 1904 at Sydney Boys Public High School, Robinson wrote a prize-winning essay on ‘The Advance of Australia in the Last Century’. At the University of Sydney, he took a first-class Honours degree in English, Latin and Greek, and the university medal for Classics in 1909, followed by a Master’s degree in Latin literature in 1911. Funded by a Cooper graduation travelling scholarship, he studied at the University of Jena in Germany from 1910 to 1912, receiving his Doctor of Philosophy magnacum laude for a thesis on Roman history, written in German and published as a short monograph in 1912. The program at Jena also included coursework in, as Robinson put it in one of his CVs, ‘Ancient History, Latin, English, Greek, Philosophy, Psychology, Modern History, Art, etc’.

It was also at Jena that Robinson attained fluency in German, a skill that led to his appointment as an intelligence officer with the rank of captain to the Australian fifth division in January 1917 — part of a distinguished military career on the Western Front, and later in the AIF Education Service in England, during World War I. Before and immediately after the war, Robinson worked as Assistant Professor of Modern Languages at the newly established Royal Military College, Duntroon, and also served as an examiner in senior English for the NSW Department of Public Instruction.

It was with this brilliant, yet eclectic, academic background that in 1922 Robinson applied for the McCaughey Chair of English Language and Literature, the first professorial appointment in English at the University of Queensland. In the event, the chair was given to J.J. Stable, who at the time had been a lecturer at the university for a decade; he eventually became Robinson’s long-term colleague in the new English program. However, later in the same year, Robinson was appointed to a lectureship in English and German, a position he took up at the beginning of 1923, at the age of 34.

Both the discipline of English and the university were in their early stages of development when these key appointments were made. The appointment processes for both Stable and Robinson would raise eyebrows today. Robinson’s personal file at the university includes a letter of August 1922 from Littleton Groome, the Commonwealth attorney-general and one of the leading conservative politicians of the day, to the Queensland Governor, Sir Matthew Nathan:

> When I was at Canberra on a recent visit, I met Dr F.W. Robinson who is being retrenched from the Duntroon Military College on account of the necessity of curtailing staffs. I thought perhaps, if you should hear of an opportunity for him in the way of a lectureship that his qualifications would be worthy of consideration. I understand he has made an application for the position for which Captain Stables [sic] is also an applicant, but I would not suggest his claims against those of Captain Stable whom I know to be a most capable man and to have rendered
That the letter was apparently influential in securing Robinson’s appointment, and the prominence given to Stable’s (controversial) war service, speak volumes for the close relationships between politics, the military and the university in these times. The fact that the Cambridge-trained Stable was appointed to a professorial position in English despite his lack of postgraduate qualifications or publications also attests to Leigh Dale’s wry comment about assumptions underlying the appointment of the first university teachers of English in Australia: ‘Publications were valued, but not to the extent that Oxford or Cambridge degrees were.’

What attracted the brilliant young classicist Robinson to the relatively new discipline of English? Part of the answer may be gleaned from a letter that Robinson received during his first year at Queensland from T.G. Tucker, Australia’s most distinguished classicist of the period but also a major figure in the development of a separate English program at the University of Melbourne:

Let me repeat my advice to you to stick to English if you can. It is both better in itself and pays better (an unusual combination). But make up your mind to create some sort of a book, or you will always be distanced by somebody who has done ‘original work’ (if it is only a silly article on ‘Mr WH’) . . . Do not shrink from a catching title for a lecture. Why should you, if it is a true one? ‘What is language coming to?’ ‘What is Wordsworth to us?’ — that sort of thing.

Like many academics of a later generation who would switch from the traditional literary studies in which they had been trained to media or cultural studies, a young classically trained scholar in the 1920s may have seen English as the ‘next big thing’.

In this judgement, Robinson and Tucker were undoubtedly right. The new discipline of English was by the 1920s taking the English-speaking academic world by storm. Walter Raleigh had been appointed to the first Chair of English Literature, excluding Anglo-Saxon, at Oxford in 1904; the English Association, which brought together school and university teachers of English, was founded in 1906; and the first independent English course at Cambridge was offered in 1917. Stable’s appointment at Queensland was part of the first wave of professorial appointments in English in Australia, which also included the universities of Adelaide (1922), Melbourne (1911), Sydney (1920) and Western Australia (1913). While the only humanities chair included in the foundation appointments to the University of Queensland in 1910 was in classics, the appointment of Stable and Robinson in the early 1920s meant that an independent English Honours program could now be offered through the Department of Modern Languages.

Tucker’s career advice was also prescient in describing the particular niche that Robinson would carve out for himself in the new discipline. Tucker’s whimsical titles — ‘What is language coming to?’ ‘What is Wordsworth to us?’ — are not far from the actual titles of the dozens of radio talks, press articles and addresses to cultural societies that Robinson produced over the years, all meticulously collected in his Fryer papers. The titles of Robinson’s frequent radio talks from the 1920s to the 1950s, for example, included ‘English as She is Spoke’, ‘What Makes Australian Literature “Australian”’, ‘The Songs in Shakespeare’s play As You Like It’, and ‘The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the University of Queensland’. Very little of this quite...
prolific output, however, took the form of formal publications such as scholarly monographs and refereed essays in academic journals. While Robinson’s career was hindered by his lack of disciplinary publications — he was promoted to associate professor in 1946 but never achieved the rank of full professor, despite at least one attempt — it is also clear that he saw his role in very different terms from those that prevail today in university teaching and research.

The world of a university academic during the time when Robinson and Stable established the English program at Queensland entailed many formal and perceived obligations beyond disciplinary teaching and research. This was particularly the case in a small and new university such as Queensland’s. The citizens of Brisbane and Queensland looked to the small community of scholars in George Street for leadership in cultural, educational and scientific matters. Robinson took this responsibility very seriously, even to the point of delivering ‘a homely talk on English . . . to railway employees at Roma-street’ in 1924. Moreover, part of the mission of university English — particularly as it distinguished itself from the classics — was to provide cultural leadership by highlighting the aesthetic, moral and philosophical rewards available through close attention to the language of everyday life and literary works written in that language. As Robinson put it in one of his talks:

> English is the repository not only of particular sciences, but of something which goes far beyond them — I mean our whole knowledge and experience of living. When the statement of this knowledge has charms of its own beyond mere utility we call it ‘literature’, though I feel myself a certain inadequacy in that word when used alone and prefer to think of the two inseparables; literature and history, both of which are again linked to a third, philosophy.

For Robinson, such universalistic claims entailed, on the one hand, a commitment to spreading the gospel of literary culture within and beyond the university, and on the other, an understanding of English as going beyond the study of literature to engage with cognate disciplines such as history and philosophy (and, as we will see, geography and anthropology).

Robinson and Stable were energetic participants in, and often instigators of, the many cultural societies that flourished in Brisbane in the inter-war period. Stable was the first president of the Queensland Authors and Artists Association (QAAA), formed in Brisbane in 1922, and also of the English and Modern Languages Association of Queensland, formed in 1923 and eventually affiliated with the London-based English Association. Robinson became a committee member of both groups at an early stage and went on to serve as president of both. The QAAA, with a primary mission of nurturing artists and creative writers, was nevertheless led in its early days by university English academics — itself an interesting example of the broad cultural role for the university teacher envisaged in the early mission of ‘English’.

Patrick Buckridge has argued that ‘a proliferating network of cultural and ethnic organisations’ in Brisbane in the 1920s — he lists thirteen such organisations established during the decade — was a significant force in maintaining civic and political harmony in an internationally turbulent period. He also rightly points out that Stable was the key figure in establishing this cultural infrastructure, at least in the first half of the decade. Robinson made a similar point in a speech he gave at Stable’s retirement in 1953, paying tribute to Stable’s role in ‘the laying of foundations for
the intellectual and cultural life of a young country’. Again, the crucial period is implicitly identified as the 1920s: ‘It is difficult today to realise how many things of cultural import in Queensland have had their first real growth, indeed their very beginnings, in the last 30 or 40 years.’14 In acknowledging Stable, Robinson was undoubtedly also remembering his own role in these ventures. In addition to his organising roles, Robinson was also a frequent presenter to new cultural societies such as the Brisbane Shakespeare Society and the Dickens Fellowship, as well as a prolific radio broadcaster on cultural matters throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

The English and Modern Languages Association of Queensland provided the institutional authority for one of Robinson’s most significant extra-mural activities during his early years as a lecturer in English — a full-scale survey and report on the teaching of English in Queensland secondary schools. In October 1927, the association considered a Report on the Teaching of English in Secondary Schools in Queensland, which it had commissioned in 1923 as a local response to the watershed 1921 ‘Newbolt’ Report on The Teaching of English in England. Robinson’s Fryer papers make clear that he was the prime mover in researching and writing this report, although he was supported by a committee of university and school teachers of English appointed by the association.15 Characteristically, Robinson went about this work methodically, sending out a detailed questionnaire to all Queensland secondary schools in 1924 and compiling and analysing the responses.

While the Queensland report embraces the central propositions of Newbolt — English as replacing the classics at the core of liberal education and literature as replacing linguistic studies at the core of English — ‘English’ is still seen as a rigorous academic discipline. School English is considered distinct from ‘the vocabulary of the street and the range of ideas of the street corner’16 and defined, prescriptively, as including ‘even at the primary stage . . . correct and adequate use of spoken English; correct and adequate use of written English . . . and . . . some acquaintance, however small, with literature, some training and attainment in reading, how to read, and what to read’.17 The Queensland report’s reservations about Newbolt may reflect Robinson’s personal perspective as a classicist and linguist moving into the new, literature-based, discipline of English: ‘in asserting the supreme value of English in education . . . it [Newbolt] tends to be less than just to other studies. Similarly, in emphasising the values and reality of literature, it runs the danger of belittling in contrast the still essential formal and scientific aspects of language study’.18 The ambivalent language of the section of the report dealing with English vis-à-vis classics also reveals some hesitation about what is nevertheless seen as a necessary transition in an age of mass education:

The lack of stress on the formal study of English which used to obtain in classical schools in England did not imply that the substance of English literature was then considered inferior, but rather that the right use of English and acquaintance with English literature should be acquired ‘naturally’ by the child, in the home, through environment, and through personal initiative. (There is a very large element of rightness in this view, which, as we shall remark later in this report, must be remembered, however perfect a formal system of English study may be evolved.)19

One practical area that spanned Robinson’s interests in school and university English was his insistence on the importance of language to the discipline — from the
theoretical level of studying phonetics and grammar to the practical one of reading literary texts aloud. According to the 1927 report:

> The almost complete absence of Phonetics from educational practice in Queensland is a definite defect, the remedy for which is long over due. As a scientifically-based section of philology, this study is over 40 years old. Its use in education on the Continent preceded by many years its adoption in England, where the study of Modern Languages (as indeed of English itself) was notably deficient.20

It may have been due to Robinson’s intervention that a section requiring candidates to transcribe a short passage into the International Phonetic Alphabet was introduced into the Queensland Senior English examination. The report also advocates the importance of reading aloud ‘practised as an art, and an end in itself’,21 and the role of the school in teaching ‘correctness in speech’.22 Robinson also worked as an examiner for ‘elocution’ (later, ‘the art of speech’) through the Australian Music Examinations Board.23

Within the university, Robinson seems to have been a vocal advocate for the oral and language elements within the English program. In 1953, he objected to a proposal to share the English seminar room with Economics as the room was used ‘For voice and reading tests, which in 1952 were extended to include all students in all English courses’ (Box 33).24 The 1927 report notes that ‘In Queensland, the University has included Phonetics in the honours courses for English and modern languages for the last six years, besides using phonetic methods in teaching.’25 University book lists from the period also bear out the importance of the language element. For example, the 1930 book list for English includes Daniel Jones’ *The Pronunciation of English* (1909, an introduction to phonetics) and Henry Bradley’s *The Making of English* (1904, a history of the language and elementary textbook on philology).

This emphasis on the importance of language study in English helps to define Robinson’s broad and humanistic understanding of the discipline — an understanding that can be distinguished from later models, such as the American ‘new criticism’ or ‘Cambridge English’ as developed by I.A. Richards and F.R. Leavis, that came to dominate university English in Australia in the period after World War II, particularly from the 1960s. While these models emphasised in different ways the autonomy of the literary text, Robinson subscribed to an older understanding of culture that sees literature as just one of the manifold ways in which humanity expresses its relationship with society, history and the natural environment.

Such an understanding of literature, including the capacity to find connections between disparate areas of knowledge that so impressed the young David Malouf, is evident in some of Robinson’s lecture notes. For example, in a 1947 lecture on the history of drama, Robinson manages to find connections between Aristotle’s notion of mimesis, Wordsworth’s ‘Intimations Ode’ (‘As if his whole vocation, / Were endless imitation’) and Aboriginal custom as reported in Tom Petrie’s *Reminiscences of Early Queensland*. He speaks of Petrie’s story of a campfire, where

> some men told stories of past exploits (*res gestae*) while others assumed the role of some person or animal. In such stories, lie the germ of epic, which has given us *The Iliad, The Odyssey*, our own Beowulf. The other men, who would assume the role of different persons, or imitate animals, show the first germ of primitive drama’.26
This line of thinking is continued in the following lecture, when Robinson describes the Aboriginal corroboree as ‘ballet, dance, singing, orchestra, drama, poetry and sometimes religious ritual, all in one’. Again, in a later lecture in the series, Robinson shows an awareness of the way in which artistic genres develop out of ritual practice in his account of the ecclesiastical origins of drama:

... first, the church services (which in their nature were dramatic); then tropes, short series of questions and answers inserted into the service or sung before or after it, by way of illustrating the great facts of the Christian story; then liturgical dramas themselves, actually performed in the churches, not as insertions in the service, but as something separate. Thence arose the Mystery and Miracle plays, a modern distinction sometimes made in name between plays on Biblical subjects and those from the lives of the saints etc. ... Out of these comes the Morality, appearing as a common form in the late 15th century. A further development is the Historical Morality, but this also belongs to the Renaissance period and influence. (Lecture 10)

Robinson’s interest in the historical development of cultural forms, and in particular how independent ‘aesthetic’ genres such as the drama or the epic develop out of, but remain in relationship with, ‘primitive’ or ‘non-aesthetic’ cultural forms such as the Aboriginal corroboree or the medieval mass, has parallels in the very early history of English studies. Franklin Court’s account of this history discusses the anthropological view of the discipline developed by such important nineteenth-century pioneers as Robert Latham and A.J. Scott (University College, London) and David Masson (University of Edinburgh):

By the 1850s, English literary study began to represent ‘culture’ as the heritage of an accumulated ineluctable racial memory upon which the ideological framework of western civilization was constructed. The search would commence in linguistic philology for originary cultural forms, primitive mental structures that literature was thought to mirror and that professors and students alike expected to locate by studying primitive linguistic constructs ... The vision of an ordered, perfectible ‘culture,’ accommodating ‘primary human affections’ that ‘subsist permanently in the race’ was one that Matthew Arnold inherited, one that owed its inception during the mid-Victorian years in large part to growing interest in ethnology ... 27

Like these nineteenth-century pioneers of the discipline, Robinson had a much broader view of the proper concerns of ‘English’ than the one that became common as the discipline was progressively circumscribed and professionalised during the twentieth century. He was also specifically influenced by Matthew Arnold, once claiming that Arnold’s influential essay ‘The Study of Poetry’ (1880) ‘is to me as daily food’. 28 Robinson even articulated a kind of Arnoldian vision of what ‘stable literary judgement’ might mean in an Australian context, arguing for ‘the support, the challenge, the corrective to individual idiosyncrasy, of a strong body of diffused critical opinion, of collective taste, among educated Australians’, which would require ‘that a large body of Australians should know their own literature, and know it well’ while also having ‘a sense of the best literature, such as is to be gained through knowledge of the whole range of English literature, preferably supported by knowledge of the classical or great modern literatures as well’. 29
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This broad view of the discipline also helps to account for Robinson’s extraordinary range of interests both within and outside ‘English’ — since ‘culture’ is important primarily because it illuminates human nature and history, a huge range of cultural forms and products are of potential interest, unencumbered by restrictive notions of literary ‘value’.

For example, Robinson was one of the very first academics to teach and research Australian literature. He would claim in his speech on Stable’s retirement that the University of Queensland ‘was the first in Australia to incorporate Australian literature in University studies’. He sought to promote a cosmopolitan notion of Australian literature that eschewed overt nationalism. As he put it in a radio talk in 1939, ‘I think we Australians tend to confuse our literature with advertising; we want to make it “sell scenery”, or to be like an Agent-General’s window in London — full of photographs, wool, oranges, and outsizes in paw-paws’. In a 1930 address, he urged:

The inclusion of Australian literature in education at all stages, as a part of English literature . . . the exclusion of a critical selection of Australian work from education would be as unjustifiable as it would be to exaggerate its place and importance on so-called ‘patriotic’ grounds. The best method of inclusion is alongside the greatest that English literature has to offer in similar kind, sometimes at least printed in one book.

This was in fact the method adopted at the university from the 1920s, with Australian texts and contextual material embedded in larger courses on English literature. In a 1940 letter to C.B. Christesen, Robinson makes a sustained defence of this ‘comparative’ method (including reference to the Aboriginal material discussed above):

For instance, for the origins of drama, epic, and all the interpretative arts the rich material afforded by the Australian aborigines is used (together with Aristotle). Australian ballads are brought in for the study of 15th century ballads and Tudor verse forms are studied along with the particularly rich variety of types in Australian verse.

In terms of the undergraduate curriculum, this cosmopolitan approach to Australian literature meant an emphasis on poetry rather than prose, and within Australian poetry an emphasis on what we might call the ‘philosophical’ tradition. For example, the poets chosen from Percival Serle’s *An Australasian Anthology: Australian and New Zealand Poems* for special study during a series of seven lectures on Australian poetry in 1947 were Harpur, Kendall, O’Dowd, Brennan, Neilsen, McCrae, Furnley Maurice and Baylebridge.

Beyond the classroom, Robinson’s Australian-related research and writing projects made use of an extraordinary range of texts, stretching well beyond most definitions of the ‘literary’ and indeed at times of ‘Australian’. Much of this unpublished material is a record of projects that for various reasons — not least Robinson’s own perfectionism — were not completed. Yet the very titles tell something of this scholar’s range and ambition: ‘The Queensland Coast in Literature’, ‘Australian Literature: The Prelude and the First Seventy Years up to 1850’, ‘Romantic Austral Commonwealths, or Imaginary Voyages to Terra Australis Incognita in the 17th and 18th Centuries’, ‘Australian Literature: Origins and Tendencies’,
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‘Australian Writers and Editors in Early Tasmania: A Contribution to the History of the Australian Press and Literature’.

While the burgeoning Australian literature movement over the middle decades of the twentieth century — as reflected, for example, in the gradual development of H.M. Green’s monumental history (the two-volume version eventually published in 1961) — concentrated on establishing a canon of literary works suitable for formal study at school and university, Robinson’s research interests took him to the margins of the emerging discipline — to scientific, journalistic, historical, anthropological and geographical, as well as creative, works that Robinson felt illuminated the idea of ‘Australia’ or some geographical or chronological part of it. Anticipating the ‘interdisciplinary’ approaches of a later generation of scholars, Robinson’s primary interest was not in making judgements about literary merit and establishing canons but in a broad conception of what we might now call cultural history — particularly cultural history linked to an understanding of place.

Robinson’s most enduring interest was in what could be called the ‘pre-history’ of Australian literature. In his 1944 Commonwealth Literary Fund lectures on ‘Australian Literature: Origins and Tendencies’, Robinson starts by distinguishing his approach to literary history from that of Green (with whom Robinson corresponded), noting that Green’s history devotes ‘at most 16 pages out of 284’ to the pre-1850 period35. Fourteen years earlier, in a talk titled ‘The Historical Survey of Australian Literature: An Urgent Need and a Program’, Robinson argued that a broad approach to cultural history was appropriate to a new literature such as that of Australia:

The frankly historical treatment of our literature will save us from misprising the beginnings and then imagining in contrast that after the chaos of our first century we have now attained great literary quality. Lastly, it is to be observed that the early record of mere fact does not always need apology from the point of view of ‘the real estimate’. For not only is truth often more romantic than fiction, but the plain narration of fact may be more truly artistic than the effort of creative imagination ... It follows from the above that the historical account of our literature should proceed not only by description of the work of individuals, but also by the record of tendencies of thought and development.36

This approach was most completely realised in the ‘Prelude to Australia’ project that engaged Robinson on and off for several decades. The germ of the idea for the project appears as far back as the 1920s. In July 1929 Robinson wrote to the Registrar requesting leave for a trip to Sydney to, among other things, ‘lecture before the Royal Australian Historical Society on “The Beginnings of Australian Art and Literature”’.37 Nearly twenty years later, Robinson was granted study leave for the whole of 1948 to work on the project, which he now described in these terms:

the growth of ‘Australian’ ideas, and of writings pertaining to Australia, beginning from the theories of Antipodeanism held by Greek Geographers in the fourth-century BC and covering the literature and cultural life of Australian settlement during its first sixty-two years, up to 1850.

He projected an ambitious series of publications arising out of the project: a critical monograph, *Australian Literature: Origins and Tendencies to 1850*; a ‘companion
volume’, *Things Australian and Selections from Australian Literature before 1850*; and a number of reprints, along with biographical and critical notes, of works of some of the key texts and writers featured in the project, such as Alexander Harris, Barron Field and early Australian magazines.38

In fact, the most substantial finished products that survive from the project are the typescripts of two lectures that Robinson delivered as the John Murtagh Macrossan Memorial Lecture in 1963. The lectures demonstrate both the strengths and weaknesses of the project, and of Robinson’s scholarship more generally. Both lectures tend to break down into a series of interesting facts and discussion of texts, with only a relatively weak attempt to develop a coherent argument based on a dominant thesis or idea. Robinson seems to acknowledge this problem himself towards the beginning of the first lecture:

Any attempt to retrace the story of the Antipodean past, to ‘discover’ Australia is likely to seem confusing and disconnected. The evidences are so numerous, so varied. There is however much truth in the dictum: ‘there are few, if any, isolated phenomena’. The more one knows of the details of the past the more it tends to link up with the times and records which succeed it — in repetition of situations, allusions, echoes, and influences.39

The difficulty in extrapolating a coherent thesis from such ‘repetition of situations, allusions, echoes, and influences’ proves the key weakness both in the lectures and in the project as a whole. So, for example, the first lecture moves from an account of the origin of the idea of the antipodes in ancient Greek philosophy and geography; to ‘A few examples of the geographical antipodes to parts of New Zealand and Australia’ (e.g. ‘Brisbane = About 9°W. of Teneriffe in the Canary Islands’); to quotations from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries to show the various uses of the word ‘antipodes’; to literary references to the antipodes in Cicero and Dante; to the actual voyages of Columbus, Magellan and others during the Renaissance; to the incorporation of some of the renaissance navigators’ discoveries in imaginative works by Marlow and Shakespeare; to a series of literary ‘imaginary voyages’ (including *Gulliver’s Travels*) that use the ‘antipodes’ as a trope for the reversal of social norms in areas such as relations between men and women — and so on. The lectures broach very complex relations between geography, history and imaginative literature without ever really finding a coherent way to deal with those relations.

Given Robinson’s ‘anthropological’ approach to literature and culture, it is not surprising that he was also one of the founders of the study of Aboriginal anthropology in Queensland. He helped to form the Queensland Anthropological Society in 1948, and became its president in 1958. The Queensland society, like the Victorian Anthropological Society (formed 1934), aimed to promote ‘the study of anthropology, and also to advocate for the preservation of the aboriginal races’.40 It provided a forum for a mixture of amateur and academic anthropologists during a time when anthropology was only beginning to be fully professionalised and incorporated into universities. Robinson also had contact with some of the most significant individuals among the first generation of academic Australian anthropologists, such as A.P. Elkin (University of Sydney) and W.E.H. Stanner (ANU).41

Robinson’s particular area of anthropological interest was the documentation and preservation of bora rings in South-East Queensland. In 1959, as president of the Anthropological Society, he prepared a *Report and Suggestions on the
Aboriginal Bora Ring Reserve on the Pacific Highway, North Burleigh, Gold Coast, Queensland and Its Adaptation as a Community Centre for All Australians. This document provides some insight into Robinson’s sympathetic, through frankly assimilationist, views on Indigenous culture, particularly the proposed ‘uses of the Bora Ring Reserve’:

It gives opportunity for us, who are the ‘second Australians’, to amend our own notorious ignorance of aboriginal culture, and to become better fitted to assimilate the first Australians into the Australian community. As you know this aim at assimilation is now a cardinal point of Australian policy.42

He goes on to embrace a kind of folk romanticism in the idea that the bora ring could be used for occasions such as school speech days, concerts, and Anzac Day ceremonies:

It allows the revival of folk dances of other races from which we are sprung, and particularly those of the ‘new’ Australians who have come more recently among us. European and other folk dances are not merely recreational; they are akin in their origins to the aboriginal ritual art which touches the very roots of our being.43

Perhaps even more interesting than Robinson’s anthropological activities is the way in which he integrated his knowledge of Aboriginal anthropology into his teaching and research on literary matters. Examples have already been quoted of Robinson’s ability to make connections between Aboriginal ritual and the development of major Western artistic forms such as the drama and the epic. At the end of a lecture on ‘the return to nature’, delivered as part of a series of lectures on ‘The History of English Literary Criticism’ in 1949, Robinson makes another characteristic ‘Australian turn’:

Query. Which is the more ‘natural’ — the Australian aboriginal or the ‘White Australian’? It is difficult to give any one key to the ‘Protean word Nature’, but it would seem that ultimately, that alone is natural which helps man to his own fulfilment in harmony with the rest of Nature, that is, of all other things in their fitness. In this sense neither the naked savage is natural, nor the (stilted) society of patches and powder in the 18th century.44

In his tribute to ‘Doc Robbie’, delivered at a dinner at the University of Queensland in 1985, David Malouf noted that Robinson ‘belonged to an older form of the university [that is] absolutely gone’:

[He] left no body of writing ... and his lectures were so rambling that I can reproduce no single idea or principle that I derived from them. But he was trying in his often incomprehensible way to demonstrate something to us. We might gather all the strands that we inherit, from Europe, from literature, from Australia itself, from our own personal experience into a strongly felt totality of experience.45

It is perhaps one of the tragedies of Queensland cultural history that Robinson left ‘no body of writing’. But what this really means is a limited body of published writing. For while Robinson’s publications consist of little more than an early history of the Canberra district, the University of Queensland’s official guide to the St Lucia campus, his edition of A Midsummer Night’s Dream for high school students and a handful of articles in (non-refereed) newspapers and magazines,
his papers in the Fryer library run to 34 boxes. This article has touched on the breadth of interests demonstrated by this material, and also Robinson’s depth of engagement with a wide range of communities and bodies of knowledge. Other interests that there is not space to deal with here include university heraldry and campus design. Robinson was a long-term champion of the ‘new’ St Lucia campus and, as well as writing the official campus guidebook, submitted his own master plan for the campus to a competition in the 1930s. He was also responsible for researching and documenting the coats of arms from universities around the world that now decorate the capitals of the columns in the Great Court at St Lucia.

Unlike other early Australian English academics such as Walter Murdoch, Foundation Professor of English at the University of Western Australia, Robinson did not leave an extensive body of cultural journalism published in general-interest newspapers and magazines. But his career also differs from the increasingly specialised world of the academic textual scholar and literary critic. Unfortunately, this has meant that Robinson’s work has had neither the wide audience of Murdoch nor the specialised but influential one of the academic literary scholar. However, his personal authority and ambitious vision of the role of university English, and of the university in general, deeply influenced generations of students and cultural enthusiasts in Brisbane and beyond. It is to be hoped that a selection of Robinson’s writing can be published in some form in coming years so that future scholars of Queensland and Australian cultural history can easily access at least some of the textual evidence for the great influence exercised by this one man in the cultural life of his time and place.

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Endnotes

1 David Malouf, ‘Speech at dinner for seventy-fifth anniversary of the University of Queensland Department of English, 1985’, Audio-recording, Fryer Library, University of Queensland.

2 F.W. Robinson collection, Box 8, 5/389, Fryer Library, University of Queensland.

3 F.W. Robinson, ‘Particulars of academic courses and teaching experience’, F.W. Robinson file, S135, University of Queensland Archives.

4 F.W. Robinson file, S135, University of Queensland Archives.

6 T.G. Tucker to F.W. Robinson, 29 August 1923, F.W. Robinson collection, Box 16.
8 F.W. Robinson collection, Box 11.
9 Robinson applied unsuccessfully in October 1952 for the position of Professor of English Language and Literature made vacant following Stable’s retirement. His application is included in his Fryer Library papers: F.W. Robinson collection, Box 1, 5/1(k).
10 F.W. Robinson collection, Box 16, 5/3.
11 ‘Shop talk: English the basis for education’, F.W. Robinson collection, Box 1, 5/436, p. 5.
12 Robinson was president of the QAAA from 1936 to 1942 (he was, in fact, succeeded as president by another University of Queensland English academic, A.K. Thomson) and president of the English Association of Queensland from 1948 to 1952.
14 ‘Professor J.J. Stable’, F.W. Robinson collection, Box 2, 5/152.
15 F.W. Robinson collection, Box 8, 5/392a.
16 F.W. Robinson collection, Box 8, 5/392a, p. 4.
17 F.W. Robinson collection, Box 8, 5/392a, p. 5.
18 F.W. Robinson collection, Box 8, 5/392a, p. 1.
19 F.W. Robinson collection, Box 8, 5/392a, p. 4.
20 F.W. Robinson collection, Box 8, 5/392a, p. 39
21 F.W. Robinson collection, Box 8, 5/392a, p. 19.
22 F.W. Robinson collection, Box 8, 5/392a, p. 35.
23 A 1929 letter on his personal university file shows Robinson notifying the Registrar of a trip to Sydney ‘to confer with, and possibly examine alongside of, the examiners in Elocution of the Australian Music Examinations Board’ (S135, University of Queensland Archives).
24 Memo of 20 February 1953, F.W. Robinson collection, Box 33.
25 F.W. Robinson collection, Box 8, 5/392a, p. 40.
30 In a letter of 6 December 1946 to Joyce Eyre of the University of Tasmania, Robinson dated this introduction of Australian literary studies to his initial appointment: ‘We have no separate course in Australian Literature in this University, but Australian Literature has formed an integral part of English 1 since I came to the University in 1923’, F.W. Robinson collection, Box 2, 5/86.
33 Letter of 10 May 1940, F.W. Robinson collection, Box 2, 5/61.
34 Lecture 1, ‘Australian poetry: Seven lectures to English 1 class of Queensland University, 1947’, F.W. Robinson collection, Box 10, 5/440. Brennan is also the only Australian poet mentioned by name in David Malouf’s anniversary speech, when he discusses the content of Robinson’s lectures.
37 Letter of 23 July 1929, F.W. Robinson file, S135, University of Queensland Archives.
38 Memo of 30 October 1947 to Registrar, F.W. Robinson collection, Box 2, 5/102.
39 F.W. Robinson collection, Box 12, 5/512, p. 2.
41 F.W. Robinson collection, Box 11, 5/505, 5/506.
42 F.W. Robinson collection, Box 8, 5/401, p. 4.
43 F.W. Robinson collection, Box 8, 5/401, p. 4.
44 ‘History of English literary criticism: 25 lectures delivered to English III class at Queensland University, 1949’, F.W. Robinson collection, Box 10, 5/441, p. 70.
45 David Malouf, ‘Speech’.