

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Bruce Bennett, *The Spying Game: An Australian Angle* (Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2012)

Bruce Bennett may have become a spy – in another life, on the road not taken. Early in his career he was interviewed for a position in the Australian Foreign Service, at the same time that he was offered a lectureship at the University of Western Australia. Bennett chose an academic career and enjoyed several decades of success as a teacher and scholar of Australian literature. ‘But I sometimes wish, and imagine, that foreign affairs had turned my head just that bit more and given me a chance to immerse myself in the world of international diplomacy and secret intelligence’ (1).

The Spying Game comes partly from this wish, and partly from Bennett’s extensive knowledge of Australian literature and culture. This is his last book (sadly, he died in 2012), leaving a body of distinguished scholarship as the author and editor of many books and over one hundred articles, essays and reports.¹ He is probably best known for his co-editorship of *The Oxford Literary History of Australia* (1998) and for his critical biography of Peter Porter, *Spirit in Exile* (1991); he also wrote accomplished essays, published in *An Australian Compass* (1991) and *Homing In* (2006). This last volume is composed mainly of collected journal articles and conference papers on the theme of the spy in Australian history, literature and culture.

Political journalist Phillip Knightley is quoted on the book’s cover, with the comment that ‘Bruce Bennett’s book reminds us of the spy within us all.’ This observation goes a long way towards explaining the fascination of *The Spying Game*: it taps into our curiosity about the secret world of spies and spooks, and their mysterious, inscrutable trade. Bennett acknowledges this in his first chapter:

The spying game begins at an early age ... Books for children reflect these interests and preoccupations. Enid Blyton’s famous five are often waiting behind rocks to spot smugglers and uncover their secrets ... [For adults] films, novels and memoirs continue to provide insights into the involvement of individuals in the clandestine struggles [of espionage]. (8)

An avid reader, I grew up with Blyton’s Famous Five and Secret Seven, graduated to James Bond and John le Carré, and continue to read Graham Greene. Anyone interested in this genre will find much to intrigue them in *The Spying Game*, whether it’s Bennett’s analysis of films such as *The Lives of Others* (set in East Germany, at the time of the Stasi regime) or his discussion of issues like ‘Spies and terrorists: Australian fiction after 9/11’.

It is the *Australian* angle, highlighted in the sub-title of the book, which is the focus of Bennett’s literary criticism. A scan of the contents pages and index uncovers the names of Patrick White, Christopher Koch, Frank Moorhouse, Michael Wilding and Janette Turner Hospital. Several chapters offer detailed analysis of specific texts, including White’s *The Twyborn Affair* and Koch’s *The Memory Game*. These give the

¹ Adrian Caesar, ‘Bruce Bennett: Colleague and Scholar,’ *Coolabah* 9 (2012) 7-11.
<http://www.ub.edu/dpfilsa/Coolabahindexvol9.html>

reader an opportunity to consider the broader fictional themes of the spying game, beyond the technicalities of hidden cameras and ‘dead drops’: questions of identity, loyalty and belonging, the dilemmas of patriotism and betrayal.

There is Australian history as well as literary criticism in *The Spying Game*. Our espionage dates from the early days of maritime exploration and penal colonies, when rival nations set spies to steal maps and informers reported on fellow prisoners. The chapter on ‘Exploration or espionage? Flinders and the French’ examines the alleged spying activities of both Matthew Flinders and François Péron, each caught up in the political and military hostility of the times. A new English translation of Péron’s reports to his government recently highlighted the possibility of a planned French invasion of Sydney, referring to his examination of ‘all the points on the coast in the neighbourhood of Port Jackson ... favourable for the debarkation of troops’ (64).²

Many names feature in the analysis of more recent Australian espionage: Nancy Wake, Ian Milner, Ric Throssell, Kim Philby, and so on. There are American and British spies as well as Australian; as Bennett explains, ‘Official intelligence agencies in Australia and New Zealand cannot be considered in isolation from the empires that have largely dictated their fortunes’ in the twentieth century (108). Nancy Wake was brought up in Australia and fought and spied for the British and the French Resistance during World War II; Kim Philby’s notorious activities were exposed by Australian expatriate journalists based in London. Bennett weaves the strands of these disparate stories together in the well written middle chapters of his book.

I enjoyed reading *The Spying Game*: its loose structure of collected essays and other pieces made it a pleasure to dip into, to discover various facts and insights about Australian espionage. (The excellent index made this especially easy to do). As it is a slender book, just over 200 pages, and mainly composed of previously published material from various sources, it does not provide a deep or thorough analysis of the subject – but it does give us many issues to consider in the cultural, biographical and literary realms of the Australian ‘spying game’.

Jennifer Osborn

² Rebecca Brice, ‘Sacre bleu: French invasion plan for Sydney,’ *ABC News*, 11 December 2012. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-12-10/aussies-study-french-invasion-plan-for-sydney/4419168>