

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Nicole Moore, *The Censor's Library* (University of Queensland Press, 2012)

How can an entire library disappear? This is the first question addressed by literary historian Nicole Moore in *The Censor's Library*. The answer is an unsettling one. It was an open secret that Australian censors kept a reference library of banned books from the 1920s to the late 1980s, but after this period the collection mysteriously disappeared. Moore found a reference to it in an anti-censorship newspaper article in 1971, but then 'across more than thirty years I couldn't trace another encounter with the collection' (xi). Her journey of research had just begun.

It wasn't until 2005 that the Censor's library – all 793 boxes and 12,000 titles of it – was rediscovered. Working with Moore, National Archives of Australia staff tracked it down in the basement of one of their branches in western Sydney; it had been carefully stored seven storeys underground, its whereabouts incompletely recorded. The Censor's library had become an unnamed deposit in an uncatalogued file series, pertaining to the Customs department.

As Moore opens the boxes and unpacks the books, she gives the library many names: the Customs library, the Censor's library, the 'purloined library', the non-Australian library. She also uses the expression 'the negative library': these books went *unread*. They were confiscated, wrapped in brown paper and 'removed from public sight ... the mistrustful, practical men who exercised authority' (124) deemed these works too dangerous – obscene, blasphemous, seditious – for Australian eyes.

The books in question were as varied as Aldous Huxley's famous *Brave New World* (1932) and Robert Close's unmemorable *Love Me Sailor* (1945). Kathleen Winsor's *Forever Amber* (1944), one of my favourite trashy novels when I was a teenager, also made it to the hit list -as did Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722). Petronius, Boccaccio, George Orwell, D.H. Lawrence, Harold Robbins, Jackie Collins: the history of censorship is somehow always as banal as it is intriguing. Reading with hindsight, you have to wonder what all the fuss was about. Here its most interesting aspects are the reflections made on *Australian* society. Why were Australian censors so very reactionary, and so over-zealous? What were they trying to 'protect' us from?

Moore explores these issues in the sixteen chapters of her well-written, thoroughly-researched book. The arrangement is thematic, so a reader can easily learn that, at different times, Australians were prevented from reading particular political pamphlets, comics, gay and lesbian material, birth control information, romance fiction, poetry and the work of modernist authors. One chapter deals with the so-called 'Bastards from the bush', Australian authors who fell foul of post-war censorship: Frank Hardy, Sumner Locke Elliott, Christina Stead and 'Ern Malley'. (On the latter, there is a wonderful irony in the idea that the work of an imaginary person could be declared obscene.) The 'Homosexualists and pornographers' section highlights the fact that 'in its various forms, homosexuality was often treated as a threat more dangerous, more pervasive and more in need of erasure than any other manifestation of obscenity' (131). Many 'suspect' titles from Europe and Australia were censored, including Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) and Jean Devanny's *Virtuous Courtesan* (1935).

'Brave new moderns' turns attention to the great modernist authors whose literary works were also banned overseas. But while D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) and Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) were the subjects of notorious world-wide censorship controversies, Huxley's *Brave New World* was banned in only two countries: Ireland and Australia. As Moore comments drily, the irony of suppressing a novel that satirized totalitarian regimes was lost on determined Australian and Irish censors.

Book reviews: *The Censor's Library* by Nicole Moore. Jennifer Osborn.
Transnational Literature Vol. 7 no. 1, November 2014.
<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

Another entry point into Moore's book is the excellent index; from here the reader can quickly check the status of authors, titles and controversies whose history interests them. Which novels by Balzac were banned? What about Orwell's famous political satire, *Animal Farm*? Or books challenging the laws on euthanasia? The notes and bibliography are also helpful and generous, pointing the reader to primary sources and further reading that cover court transcripts, interviews, archival sources, books and journal articles.

With meticulous scholarship, Nicole Moore offers a number of reasons for twentieth century Australia's infamously active history of censorship. She considers the impact of the former settler colony mentality, the fact that Australia's book market was dominated by British imports, and the nation's status as an island ('a national border easily policed through parcel post and ship and air traffic' (5)). She emphasises that Australians were subject to particularly extensive 'modern bureaucratic control' that took the form of 'a rigorous and successful censorship regime' (6). The system was widespread, invasive and costly to establish and maintain. How many myths of Australian culture and identity does this overturn? The 'lucky country', the 'classless society', the relaxed and easy-going mentality of a tolerant, laid-back culture? How much does it confirm the image of Australia as the site of ignorance and philistinism, the ugly 'cultural cringe'? Like all good scholarship, Moore's work raises as many questions for consideration and debate as it answers with evidence and interpretation.

The Censor's Library – 'uncovering the lost history of Australia's banned books' – is a scholarly and insightful work that is also stylishly written and a pleasure to read. I would recommend it to anyone interested in twentieth-century Australian history and culture, to readers of literature and to advocates of democracy and freedom of expression. It is disturbing to discover just how many books Australians were *not* allowed to read.

Jennifer Osborn