Michael Farrell. *Writing Australian Unsettlement: Modes of Poetic Invention 1796-1945* **(Palgrave Macmillan)**

When Gladys Gilligan wrote 'The Settlement' in early 1930 — her "account" of life at the Moore River Native Settlement north of Perth — she was just fourteen years old. Gilligan was one of the 50,000 'half-caste' children forcibly removed (stolen) from her family and placed on a mission between the 1890s and 1970s. As a child resident of the Settlement, and perhaps because of her flair for writing (in this case, in English), Gilligan was requested to write 'The Settlement' by the Chief Protector of Aborigines, A.O. Neville. There are traces of resistance: resistance both to the idea of settlement/and the Settlement itself, and resistance to the ventriloquism Gilligan must enact in order to write the document. Her text begins as follows: 'The Settlement lies on the bank of a river which is called the Moore River, the hills surrounding it making it look quite a pleasant home' (157). In these lines, the 'slippage' (157) between a pleasant home and something that 'look[s] quite a pleasant home' is resonant. While Gilligan was institutionalised and denied the right to basic freedoms, her voice in 'The Settlement' maintains her independence.

In *Writing Australian Unsettlement*, Gilligan's 'to [o]rder' (153) document is just one of the exemplary dozen or so 'unsettled' Australian texts that poet-critic Michael Farrell reads from the 'long colonial era' (4) using a 'counter-lens of "unsettlement"' (10). As Farrell explains, 'the word "unsettlement" is being used with increasing frequency in a range of Australian literary critical contexts' (7). In Farrell's case, it 'refers to the text's relation to settlement as such, and its material negation or resistance' (7). He goes on to point out that unsettlement 'is not guaranteed by antisettlement sentiment' but is 'effected through writing practice' (7). This distinction is important because it emphasises that writing *does* something. And in *Writing Australian Unsettlement*, the texts under consideration unsettle notions of literariness, and what we might think of as colonial 'settled' writing.

Farrell's work is influenced by Philip Mead's seminal *Networked Language* (2008), in which Mead makes the case for the unsettlement of language in Australian poetry. Mead avers that the 'breaking up' of language is a key feature of contemporary poetics, and is a move towards an Australian literature that 'comes to terms with the *un*settling difference of Indigenous narratives of place and history and the plural knowledges of the multicultural present'.[1] Mead considers poetic language in the 'contemporary moment' (2). Farrell, in contrast, retrieves historical texts such as Ned Kelly's *The Jerilderie Letter* and Bennelong's 'Letter to Mr Philips, Lord Sydney's Steward' and reads them for their 'poetic interest' (195) rather than simply as historical by-products of colonisation.

Farrell is concerned with the agency these writers possess despite — or perhaps because of — their marginal positions, and also the marginal positions of their work. The collected texts here are 'fugitive' (32) texts, either falling outside the canon of Australian literature or unsettling the canon in a myriad of ways. As Farrell writes,

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[1] Philip Mead, *Networked Language. Culture & History in Australian Poetry* (North Melbourne, Victoria: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2008) pp. 400-01 (Mead's italics).

Australian literature … is not and never was, settled. From its beginning it was being made and remade by writers of different cultures, whether Indigenous, Chinese, convict Irish, or working or middle-class English settlers. These writers invented new material practices of lettering style, syntax, and punctuation usage, as well as new and networked affects, tones and ironies. (195)

In Farrell's reading of these works, it is his particular focus on punctuation (or lack thereof) and 'the space of the text' (6) that is most instructive. He explains that in unsettled texts, the markings on the page 'de-privilege the semantic and grammatical' (6). And he demonstrates this conceit by taking us through a range of colonial writings that use punctuation, syntax, grammar, phrasing, spacing, and language in experimental ways.

The collection begins persuasively by pairing together the historically significant and much anthologised *The Jerilderie Letter* by Ned Kelly, and 'Letter to Mr Philips, Lord Sydney's Steward' by Bennelong, reading them 'through the practice of hunting' (13). Kelly and Bennelong were both hunted writers. As hunted writers, their letters are written in order to emancipate (Kelly) and conciliate (Bennelong). Farrell argues that their position as hunted/hunter writers shows on the page. It does so for Kelly in his 'sporadic' use of punctuation, especially the full stop and its 'misalignment with capitalization, suggest[ing] the sentence as a moving space, if not one that is out of control' (45); it does so for Bennelong is his over-use of the colon in tandem with his 'highly polite' tone. Farrell notes that Bennelong's use of the colon is 'unusually sophisticated in a text by a not conventionally literate writer' (27), and suggests that the colons may have been added in later by a scribe. But in any case, he suggests, they 'are the punctuation of [Bennelong's] English-speaking person' (29) and show him to be a man, perhaps, proudly exhibiting his multilingualism. The poetic choices involved in the creation of these texts are significant because they highlight the agency of these two hunted (hunter) writers.

And it is in the structure of *Writing Australian Unsettlement's* and the pairing together of the works in this collection that Farrell's contribution is significant. What seem to be quite disparate texts are corralled together or counterpointed, using punctuation as the key, to give the effect of an eclectic but literarily revealing ensemble. Farrell does indeed demonstrate that Australian writing 'is not and never was, settled' (195). This is reiterated in the punctuation 'inventive' diary of Chinese goldminer, Jong Ah Sing's *The Case* (1876?); in the 'unconventional … misspellings' (104) of Aboriginal activist Norman Harris's 'Letter to Jim Bassett'; in the secret, self-reflexive and experimental texts (outside of their anthologised oeuvres) of well-known colonial poets Dorothea Mackellar, Charles Harpur and Mary Fullerton; in the collaborative 'translations of Ngarla oral texts into English' (129) between an Indigenous and non-Indigenous editor in the *Ngarla Songs*; and finally in the 'materially, structurally and grammatically' (175) unsettled texts of the travelling diaries of settler women, drover bush texts, inscriptions on Wiradjuri Clubs, and the Baroque drawings of an Indigenous stockman, Charlie Finnigan (175). This last group represent perhaps the most unsettled of all the texts in the collection as they are literally carved into trees (drover texts) and wood (Waradjiri Clubs), or are written while on the run or homeless (travelling diaries). These unhoused texts 'come directly out of the practice of settlement' (183) but the writers themselves are not settled. Placed at the end of the collection, they serve as reminders of just how diverse and 'fugitive' Australian colonial writing can be.

As Mead argues, poetic texts have 'an after-life in subsequent and changing cultural contexts'.[2] A poem's after-life is significant in that it leaves a map, a poetic textual history, of what has been before and, just as importantly, what is coming into being. Farrell's *Writing Australian Unsettlement* is a welcome addition to the growing body of Australian literary criticism that revisions how we read the texts of the past (and present) by reconfiguring the historical significance of those texts, or by shifting the angle of vision. While I'm sure demand for space would have ruled out the possibility, an appendix with primary reproductions of these extraordinary (handwritten) texts would have been a delightful addition — especially as their significant contribution to Australian literature is in their visual poetics (11) of the page.

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[2] Mead, p.1