

Signs of Subtlety in the Short Stories of Katharine Susannah Prichard and Peter Cowan¹

Glen Phillips

Edith Cowan University, Australia

Abstract

This essay discusses the truth of a commentary by Dr Dale Spender on the history of gender and subtlety in earlier Australian literature by making a comparison of selected stories of two of the greatest Australian prose writers of the mid-twentieth century: Katharine Susannah Prichard (1883-1969) and Peter Cowan (1914-2002). Spender believes that Australian women authors, by virtue of their deeper insights and more delicate descriptive writing, can claim a uniqueness in their depictions of Australian life and landscapes in short stories compared to male authors. This essay focuses on stories by the two authors and argues that these works would be appropriate for testing the truth of Spender's claim. Both writers published many volumes of stories and in fact Prichard's first story to be translated (*Christmas Tree*) was published in Chinese in the 1920s. Cowan was almost a generation younger than Prichard but their writing careers overlapped. He published eight volumes of stories, and she published five. Using post-colonialism and ecocriticism as its theoretical references, this article argues that, while Spender might be correct when she claims that male authors in the early years of Australian literature lacked sophistication or subtlety, Prichard and Cowan do not deserve the same criticism. Even allowing for the greater amplitude of Prichard's work in the international sphere, Cowan does not lack sophistication and subtlety. To a certain extent, both Prichard and Cowan demonstrate the rapid growth of sophistication and subtlety in the youthful history of Australian writing. So perhaps we should just celebrate them and be thankful their works remain remarkably subtle and highly readable to this day.

Keywords: *Dale Spender, subtlety, gender, Australian short stories, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Peter Cowan*

1. Introduction

“Subtlety Could Not Be Handed Out to the Men” (Spender, 1988, p. 150)

In this essay I will discuss the truth of Dr Dale Spender’s above commentary on the history of Australian prose literature by making a comparison of selected stories of two of the greatest Australian prose writers of the mid-twentieth century: Katharine Susannah Prichard (1883-1969) and Peter Cowan (1914-2002). The above quotation of Spender seems to imply that, if compared with male authors, Australian women short story writers, by virtue of their deeper insights and more delicate descriptive writing, can claim special and superior qualities in their depictions of Australian life and landscapes over the last 200 years.

I will focus on stories by both the above two authors and argue they are appropriate choices for testing the truth of this claim. According to Spender, we might expect to discover the superiority of Prichard’s stories as opposed to Cowan’s. Both writers published many volumes of stories and in fact Prichard’s first story to be translated into a foreign language, “Christmas Tree”, was published in Chinese in the 1920s (one of her stories in Chinese was also published in Hong Kong in 1974). Cowan was almost a generation younger than Prichard but their writing careers overlapped. He published eight volumes of stories, and she published five. The first substantial book of studies on Cowan, (Bennet & Miller, 1992) was entitled *New Critical Essay*. The earliest major published study of Prichard was Henrietta Drake-Brockman’s *Katharine Susannah Prichard* (Brockman, 1967) and subsequently her only son, Ric Throssell wrote her biography (*Wild Weeds and Windflowers*, 1975). It is in a very recent on-line review that rising expert on Prichard, Dr Nathan Hobby, has proposed her complete collected stories should be published for the first time:

It could showcase her development as a writer and the themes which preoccupied her over different periods and show how substantial her body of short fiction is. (Hobby, 2016, para. 8)

Post-colonialism and ecocriticism will be the theoretical references for this paper since both authors chose Aboriginal characters and the Western Australian landscapes for some stories. Such a selective comparison of course risks over-simplification in its obvious selectivity in the face of the hundreds, indeed thousands, of men and women writers throughout Australia’s literary history. But I will attempt this possibly impossible task more as a way to draw those who listen to my argument into the heartlands of our short story writers rather than any real hope of settling the debate opened up by Dr Spender’s claim about the deficiencies of the male writers.

As I see it, Spender’s argument is that it was the women writers of Australia who were uniquely responsible for introducing a subtlety that was lacking in the celebrated male authors of early Australian writing. This could be tested by selecting works by women and men writers and examining them for the validity of her thesis. For the purposes of a

conference, I select the above two authors whose work I know very well. Their writing comes mainly from the middle parts of the 20th century, but I believe their achievements as outstanding prose writers can help to settle the truth of Spender's claim. Both Prichard and Cowan have previously been subjects of several previous papers of mine.

2. Theoretical Considerations

When we talk about Australia, we are talking about a colonised continent, with the survivors of that invasion still interacting with the colonists. Therefore, post-colonial theory could be useful in discussing the emergence of Australian literature. Of course, psycho-analytical theory is invoked by Spender's above judgment but I claim that a third area of theory is particularly appropriate to a comparison of Prichard and Cowan, *viz.* ecocriticism (Glottfelty & Fromm, 1995). This critical stance is now well known in China since it was introduced to students there by proponents such as myself during the last ten years or so. It is a theory obviously related to environmental awareness and the one thing almost all Australian authors have shared is an unusual tendency to be preoccupied with the landscape itself. After all, this was one attraction for the early settlers in the 18th and 19th centuries, because the continent had remained unoccupied by colonial invasion ever since the Australian Aborigines first arrived some 60-70,000 years ago. Apart from satisfying the British and European desire for possession of new lands, Australia offered them unique landforms, flora and fauna to report back to Europe. Compounding such preoccupations with 'nature' was the realization of the uniqueness of flora and fauna among landforms that had been undisturbed by agriculture and mining until the arrival of the British settlers.

One more aspect of this environmental awareness is the Aboriginal people's millennial knowledge of their 'country'. Through their culture they were uniquely bonded with the land for reasons of survival as well as their belief and education/training systems for the young. So in our two selected authors' short stories, I will search for inheritance of a desire for new knowledge and environmental awareness that slowly developed, often under the tutelage of the Aboriginal people. Such tendency could be significant evidence of that subtlety in Australian writing that Dr Spender clearly advocates. If we were to apply 'eco-feminist' theory to this analysis, no doubt even more insights would result. Additionally there is a potential source of evidence here of an anticipation of today's worldwide approval of ecological awareness and indeed global warming as a 'new' kind of human subtlety. We will look closely at the concern for Australian Aborigines contained within the prose fiction of Katharine Susannah Prichard and to a lesser extent in Peter Cowan's stories.

3. Subtlety and Early Australian Short Story Writers

Perhaps the quoted judgment of Dr Dale Spender in her famous study, *Writing a New World: Two Centuries of Australian Women Writing* (Spender, 1988)—during Australia's

Bi-centennial year) seems a harsh judgment of Australia's male authors—that they failed to show subtlety in their prose writing. I knew Dale Spender briefly when she once visited Perth and was most impressed by her advocacy of the many 'forgotten' early women writers of Australia. Their eclipse is not so surprising because until the late 1960s Australian literature as a *genre* was rarely taught in universities in Australia. The undergraduate English course I studied at the University of Western Australia in the late 1950s contained no Australian writers at all. Our professor of English, brought over from Oxford University, was reputed to have given a lecture entitled 'The Regrettable Absence of Nightingales in Australian Poetry'—the nightingale being a bird confined to England and Europe, as you know. So how could we previously have learned about Australia's women writers (except from the schoolroom reading books or popular press in Australia), let alone learn about our male authors? How things have changed since those years!

The question of a lack of subtlety in the Australian short story is an important one. Australian readers in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century were eager to read stories about their new nation. The lives that Australians led outside the few major cities were, on the whole, lonely and simple ones. As agricultural workers (like my grandparents and uncles and aunts) or gold miners, pearl fishers or whalers, they often had few male companions, 'mates' as they called them, and fewer female companions. I remember the bookshelves of my uncles' bedrooms replete with a few volumes of poetry of Banjo Paterson, some short story collections of Henry Lawson and precious copies of the famous *Bulletin* magazine that published stories and poetry and comments on our new Australian writers. Most country people, like my mother, left school at the age of 12-14 years and worked on the family farm until they were married and able to start sharing a farm for themselves. Few women writers could have struggled to break into the book market dominated by men writing for men. There were some, of course, who did and could become household names—Mrs Aeneas Gunn, Barbara Baynton, Miles Franklin, Molly Skinner, Mary Durack, and Katharine Susannah Prichard are just a few. And we will look at some of Prichard's stories in a moment.

Reading Dale Spender's judgement once again forces me to look at what past Australian authors actually wrote. For them the great challenges of survival in the outback were certainly embodied in their prose and verse—characters chosen from sheep farmers to sheepshearers; wheat farmers to goldminers; timber-cutters to sugar cane-cutters were both their subjects and their potential readers. And the female characters in the stories were their companions and so included Aboriginal women and lonely farmers' wives; drovers' wives and bullock drivers' wives; hospital nurses and elementary school teachers. So were these the readers for whom the stories were mainly intended? Outside of Australia's few large cities it must have been these rural workers and families and perhaps distant relatives or potential settlers back in Britain. Inside the populated Australian cities maybe it would be more the middle-class readers—office workers and, later, the factory workers, transport workers and workers on the wharves, together with their families. Husbands of these city people usually prided themselves on supporting their women,

once married, to stay at home in a domestic child-caring role. Only the two World Wars changed that somewhat, for women came under pressure to replace missing men in the workforce.

With so many men away overseas 1914-1918 and 1939-1945, no doubt women readers might have begun turning to stories less devoted to the outback and so women writers had more chance to be published. The rise of women's magazines and later the introduction of 'serial' stories on the new radio as a medium for entertainment would have had similar effects. It is therefore no coincidence that the emergence of many famous female Australian authors occurred in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Ada Cambridge, Miles Franklin, Ethel Anderson, Henry Handel Richardson, Nettie Palmer, Marjorie Barnard, Eleanor Dark, K. S. Prichard and Christina Stead were widely read quite early. Later towards the mid-20th century, many more women authors came to prominence.

After the First World War returning soldiers did introduce numbers of stories about the lives of the troops at Gallipoli and on the Western Front in France which added fresh locations for Australian stories as another dimension to the former outback and domestic scenes. We should remember that Prichard lost her beloved brother Alan in the First World War as a reporter on the war in Britain, met her recuperating Victoria Cross-winning husband-to-be Hugo Throssell in a hospital there.

4. Prichard and Cowan's Short Stories

Both Katharine Prichard and Peter Cowan (who, incidentally, served in the Australian Airforce in World War II) published most of their stories over the period of 1920-1970, although Cowan lived on until 2002, bringing out his last short story collection in 1988. Because of my long association with these two writers' lives and works, I founded the K. S. Prichard Writers' Centre in 1985 and am now its Patron; and I helped institute the Peter Cowan Writers' Centre at Edith Cowan University in 1995 and served on its management committee to the present day (Phillips, 2001). On Cowan I have presented a paper: "Rural Workers in Western Australian Fiction" (Phillips, 2002). I delivered an early academic paper on Prichard for the University of Western Australia Summer School in 1984 under the title of "Melodious and Cruel—The Two Most Celebrated Novels of Katharine Susannah Prichard" (Phillips, 1984) and another one entitled "Reaching Out: the International Reputation of Katharine Susannah Prichard" (Phillips, 1986). My other paper "Katharine Susannah Prichard, a Woman of her Time" (Phillips, 2000) was published in *New Directions in Australian Studies* (Driesen & Mitchell, 2000). Therefore I believe it appropriate for me to test both of these writers by reference to some of their selected stories. Dr Spender's argument is that the dominance of male fiction writers in the received pantheon of the early history of Australian literature denied or reduced the influence of our first women writers. The latter were capable of providing subtleties that can give a less crass picture of Australian life in those times. So my examination of these

four stories will concentrate on two aspects—perceptible differences between Prichard and Cowan in terms of subtlety; and evidence of improvement in subtlety on the part of both writers compared with the earlier era of Lawson, Paterson and Steele Rudd when our women writers were not as well known.

I have chosen from the work of Katharine Susannah Prichard: ‘N’Goola’ and ‘Yoirimba’; and from Peter Cowan: ‘Mobiles’ and ‘The Tractor’. The four stories I propose to discuss, two by each writer, also reflect environmental issues, relations between men and women and relations between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous people in Western Australia.

4.1 Prichard’s ‘N’Goola’ and ‘Yoirimba’

‘N’Goola’ was first published in 1959 as the title story for the collection *N’goola and Other Stories* and was illustrated by the famous Australian artist Noel Counihan. The endpapers of the first edition featured Aboriginal-derived motifs and following the story is a list of Aboriginal words and their meanings. Prichard always researched her subjects carefully, going back to her first contacts with the Namatji people of the Pilbara area over 1000 kms north of Perth. This was when she was writing her novel *Coonardoo* in the late 1920s. ‘Yoirimba’ was also published in *N’Goola*.

The story ‘N’Goola’ (meaning the south-west shrub, the sweet-scented ‘boronia’) begins with an encounter between hybrid or part Aborigine Mary and an old Aboriginal man Gwelnit on the outskirts of a north-west town. It seems he is a man derelict of tribe and family, wandering in search of his lost daughter, N’Goola. Mary lived with her husband in a ‘native reserve’ on the outskirts of the local town, as many indigenous people were forced to do then (and where many still have to live today). However, the meeting is extended when Mary hears the old man singing a powerful lament for his lost daughter but in the dialect of the southern Noongar people, her own origins. Overcoming her initial revulsion for the decrepit mourning father, Mary is surprised to learn that the lost daughter was in fact the product of an encounter between the old man’s wife and a white man who had seduced her. Yet, according to Aboriginal culture, the baby is taken in by the family as their own although the shamed mother eventually leaves the baby N’Goola to die on a nest of the fierce meat ants. Rescued by Gwelnit, the baby is nurtured finally by her contrite mother. Grown to girlhood, N’Goola suffers further when she is seized by the police as part of the Australian Government’s policy of not allowing mixed race Aboriginal children to remain with the exiled Aboriginal people.

This is the phenomenon now labelled the ‘stolen children’ disgrace, but the cause of immense grieving and emotional suffering on the part of the Aboriginal people. Nevertheless, the white ruling majority were convinced they were ‘saving’ the affected children by trying to ‘civilise’ the perceived ‘disgraced’ progeny and to assuage their collective sense of guilt for the moral crime of miscegenation on the part of their own errant white fathers. Prichard neatly concludes this story of exposure of hypocrisy on the part of white brethren by having Mary confessing that indeed she herself is the missing N’Goola:

The old man moved back from the embers of his fire when he had no more to say. Their glow touched the deeply furrowed weather-beaten bronze of his face. His eyes went past Mary, unwilling to meet hers. He gave no sign of having sensed what he had done to her, lifting a shroud from her mind, and stirring in her that conflict between her desire to live like a white woman and her loyalty to the traditions of the dark people. (Prichard, 1959, p. 23)

I have retold this story at some length to set the scene for an understanding of Prichard's determination to expose the kind of community evil of colonialism. She felt it was her role to do so as a responsible journalist and as a communist, critical of the evils of a capitalist landlord-dominated society. Her moral anger undoubtedly originated when she was reporting the evil social consequences of World War I in England in 1914, a war manipulated by capitalist countries and supported by the great armament companies. Her condemnation and exposure of the exploitation of Aboriginal women was first powerfully expressed in her play *Brumby Innes* in 1929—a theme too explosive for the play to be performed in her own lifetime—and taken to the height of a classic tragedy with the London publication of her novel *Coonardoo* (Prichard, 1929), which took a less direct critical route. So we need to see this much later story of 'N'Goola' as Katharine's persistence through her lifetime in confronting her national and international readership with a just theme, one that confirms her distance from the 'unsubtle' pioneer stories of the popular male Australian writers who preceded her. One important point to remember is that she did not write these works as a journalist but as a consummate author capable of both compelling narratives and lyrical descriptive prose. She prided herself on dividing her artistic self from that of the tireless political campaigner of her Marxist political beliefs.

But a more serious point would be raised now by contemporary Aboriginal scholars and spokespersons. It is no longer necessary for non-indigenous Australians to speak on behalf of them either as commentators or as authors of creative works. For there are a host of brilliant Aboriginal writers much more capable and entitled to write about their own culture and from their own unique point of view. Many are now well-known in China because of the work of Chinese specialists in the field of Aboriginal literature. Years ago I may have been among the first Australian academics to bring forward at China-Australia conferences names such as multi-award winning Aboriginal novelist Kim Scott, dramatist and poet Jack Davis and Aboriginal women writers such as Doris Pilkington Garimara, Alexis Wright, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Sally Morgan and Glenyse Ward. But now such writers are invited to visit China to contribute themselves to the story of the Aboriginal people in Australia.

The second story by Prichard is 'Yoirimba'. Again I test Dr Spender's claim of the 'necessary' influence of Australian women writers in adding subtlety to the crude bush stories that had prevailed for the first hundred years of white settlement:

It was a half-acre block of wildflowers and rocks in the hillside when Miss Priscilla bought it.

An old white-bodied gum tree and a few saplings stood out against the sky.... The road wound up-hill a mile away, but Miss Priscilla broke a track through the bush to her block.... From the hillside, you could see the wide-spread plains with the silver thread of a river loping across. Lights of the city sparkled along the horizon at dusk. (Prichard, 1959, p. 38)

From Prichard's own cottage on the slopes of the Darling Ranges east of Perth this is a similar scenario even today if we are to look westward to the Indian Ocean. Prichard too loved the natural bush with its wildflowers and treasured the sanctity of its rural location which allowed her peace to complete her manuscripts. However, Miss Priscilla in Prichard's story is an elderly schoolteacher looking for a location to build for her retirement a house in a natural environment. Sadly, her aged parents must sell their farm in the outback and Priscilla invite them to come to live in her own new cottage refuge in its natural environment. Unexpectedly she is transferred to a school hundreds of miles away in the goldfields and can only come to them in the school holidays. However, the parents seem surprisingly self-reliant in the new location of their daughter's home in the hills while she is away and set out to transform the house and the garden according to their own desires—conventionally furnishing it with curtains to block out the bush views; transforming the wild garden into a miniature farm with all the wildflowers replaced by vegetable gardens; and pet animals and chickens introduced to drive away the native birds. Her vision of a retirement in peaceful natural surroundings destroyed, Miss Priscilla does not dare to disappoint her parents but she sadly takes down the name she has chosen for her property, *Yoirimba*, which she has erected on a signpost. The name comes from the local Aboriginal dialect, meaning 'Oh, how beautiful!'

She stood at the gate and gazed at the place, broken-hearted. Gone were the trees and bushes she loved. (Prichard, 1959, p. 42)

Prichard anticipates by many years today's changed attitudes to the natural environment which derive from a number of sources. First, the growth of suburbs extending out for tens of kilometres from the capital cities has destroyed any sense of the unique Australian bushlands that attracted settlers to Australia in the first place. Additionally, the public have now begun to appreciate the wisdom of the Australian Aborigines in preserving the precious unique environment of this land. Prichard uses Miss Priscilla's Aboriginal name for the property to symbolise the inability of the white settlers to learn from a much wiser and older culture about appropriate relations with the environment. How close this story was to Prichard's own heart can be gauged from her own determination to live out her life to the end in a semi-wild garden until her death in 1969 at the age of 85.

4.2 Cowan's 'Mobiles' and 'The Tractor'

Turning now to Peter Cowan, whose famous grandmother was a resolute campaigner for

the rights of women in Australian society and the first woman member of an Australian parliament, we might consider just one of his short stories that feature inter-sexual power relations and issues of exploitation and ageism. Over and above the simple story we see demonstrated the abilities of a master storyteller who can raise such issues so economically and skilfully while evoking powerfully the landscapes of the Australian desert traveller with all their potential menace, not excluding the ever-present risk out there of actually dying in the bush. There is no question that subtlety is a primary characteristic of this kind of storytelling. On the other hand, such ‘road stories’ are strongly represented in the history of American fiction writing and one might suppose Cowan had read with interest a good deal of those stories.

In the story ‘Mobiles’ an elderly male traveller in an outback desert summer offers a lift to two hitch-hikers—young itinerant women workers it seems—who say a truck driver has dumped them by the wayside. These brash youngsters, who even might be of Aboriginal origin, (but that is never confirmed), seem cheerful enough but cynical about the old man’s interest in the art of mobiles. For he has suspended within his camper van several of his wire and plastic sculptures, or mobiles. Hence the title of the story is ‘Mobiles’, but there is an obvious suggestion that this might apply in a different sense to the two girls roaming the backroads. But another reference occurs when windmills for the sheep stations come into view. At this point the girls ask the driver to stop urgently to answer their need for ‘calls of nature’. While the old man turns away discreetly and waits by the roadside, the youngsters jump back into his van and drive it away, leaving him the victim of their confidence trick:

The scrub stretched out from the road. Thin, no trees. Not even shade...he pulled over and they came up, swung the door. Very quick. As if they thought he would change his mind. The dark girl sliding across close, chewing, the sharp scent of the gum. He said: it’s hot here (Phillips et al., 2015, p. 61)

One of his ‘mobiles’ is blown or thrown out of the departing vehicle as the thieves escape. Despite the abbreviated, Hemingway-esque style, there is subtlety in the telling of this very short story for it deals with so many themes—not just disillusionment with youth on the part of the man. Before their theft and escape the girls had brazenly offered to prostitute themselves. Another irony is that, although he rejects the offer, they still get their ‘payment’ in the form of the stolen vehicle. They steal his vehicle but time has already stolen the old man’s youth. And by mentally speculating on their unsubtle if scanty feminine charms, the old man is not blameless either in the gender power play. Are we to assume they are in fact local women of Aboriginal origins corrupted by the modern western consumer society? If they are, then their actions might reflect the vengeance of decades of violated tribal women. But these youngsters too bear some guilt in their attitudes to the vulnerabilities of age. Or is Cowan deliberately playing on the racial prejudices of his readers by revealing to them how automatically they might make

negative judgments of the two predatory girls for reasons of sexism (or racism). The more I re-read this story the more 'subtlety' I see in it and not always to the credit of the author, perhaps. For I feel sure that Dr Spender would agree that the subtlety of this story might even go beyond the author's intentions.

A second short story by Peter Cowan was written much earlier in his career, possibly just after World War II. 'The Tractor' is set in the era when the original West Australian wheat and sheep small farms had begun to need more land to remain profitable. Already the wheatbelt itself had begun to rival the disastrous dustbowl areas of the USA immortalised in the prose fiction of John Steinbeck. In fact, this part of Western Australia is subject to highly destructive salination and soil erosion. 'The Tractor' is a story that should resonate with ecocriticism theorists for it tells of the infliction of further damage to an already damaged environment. And conversely it fields two environmental heroes who resist those who wished to do that damage for future profit, the farmers descended from the settler-invaders. At first this seems a relatively simple story plot but it is more complex. Initially, Ann, a local elementary school teacher ready to marry the farm owner, is just sorry to see this beloved tract of bush with its trees and wildflowers destroyed. But later, when she seeks out the hermit, possibly of Aboriginal origin, who is fighting against the great land-clearing tractors to retain his illegal camping sites in the remnant bush block, she sees that there are much more serious issues. Attitudes to all living things are involved. The farmers label the mystery intruder as a danger to them, like unwanted vermin—rabbits, foxes and other pests—who would reduce the farmers' profits. Once the hermit in the minds of the farmers becomes just another vermin, they see no crime in eliminating him and in fact he is shot down like a wild animal. We understand that Ann's previous assumptions about the innocent pastoral life have been shattered. Her encounter with the protector of this native bush had brought a tragic enlightenment about him and the wild bush he was protecting:

I wanted to help you,' she said, and she despised herself in her terror. Only his hands seemed to move faintly about the rifle. His silence was insupportable. Abruptly she began to sob, the sound loud, gulping, ridiculous, her hands lifting to her face. (Cowan, 2015, p. 40)

This is not a story lacking in subtlety. It is full of symbolism and irony. I first read it 60 years ago as an undergraduate in my honours year. I remember identifying with the female protagonist, Ann. In a sense, its impact on me was shared with that female character because my grandmother on the family farm pioneered in the first years of the 20th century insisted that one section of about five acres at the entrance of our old family farm be left as virgin bush. To my mother's delight, this patch of bush remained with its wildflowers intact until after the farm was sold following the death of my grandparents in the mid-century. For this reason perhaps, Cowan's story, dating from about that time has retained its strong impact on me.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this essay is to discuss the truth of that comment of Dale Spender about the thwarted contribution of Australian women writers to our literature. I have already intimated that the task I set myself was really an impossible one. Nevertheless I have tried to draw readers ‘into the heartlands’ of two of Australia’s greatest exponents of the short story art by making some comparisons.

From what we have seen of the pairs of stories from Katharine Susannah Prichard and Peter Cowan, at least by the middle of the twentieth century these two authors were capable of subtlety far in advance of what constituted an acceptable story for the reading public in the late 19th century in Australia. So, unlike Spender, I am going to ‘hand out’ plaudits of admirable subtlety to both authors. In her ‘Foreword’ to the short story collection *Happiness* (Prichard, 1967) Prichard mentioned the influence on her of Carlyle, Walter Pater, Chekhov, Gorky, Remy de Gourmont, de Maupassant and most of all Anatole France—‘the elegant subtlety and irony of his style’. That is partly why she went to Europe before the First World War—to make sure that she had served an apprenticeship as an international writer. Thus, when she ultimately represented her fellow Australian authors on the international scene, perhaps she would not betray them with the awkwardness that Spender found so disappointing in the male writers of Australia.

In a similar way, maybe, Cowan’s close reading of modernist American writers (along with his fellow Australians, men and women) must have contributed to the subtlety we have observed in the two stories of his which have been mentioned in this paper. And certainly, Cowan’s prestigious status in the history of Australian short story writing is a confirmation of that. Both Prichard and Cowan have been the subject of many appreciative statements by commentators (and also justifiable criticisms at times) but I leave a thorough-going review of these to other scholars of Australian Literature for whom there is plenty of scope for doctoral dissertations in the future. In a foreword to Prichard’s *N’Goola* in 1959 the esteemed novelist Vance Palmer, referred to her novels and short stories of thirty years before as ‘indisputable evidence that a new writer had arisen, one of lyric freshness, of original vision, of dramatic power.’ Emeritus Professor John Barnes, a former colleague of Peter Cowan at the University of Western Australia is currently engaged in a detailed study of the life and work of Peter Cowan. Last year, for a commemorative volume of Cowan’s short stories, *Homecoming*, that I helped to produce, Barnes wrote the following:

After more than sixty years my first encounter with Peter Cowan as a writer remains fresh in my mind...but what made it so satisfying for me ...was its subtle revelation of feeling beneath the surface of the situation...Peter Cowan stood out from his contemporaries because he freed himself from the restrictive tradition of anecdotal story-writing which was then dominant in Australia. (Barnes, in *Homecoming: Peter Cowan Writers Centre 20 Years*, Eds., G. Phillips et

al., 2015, p. 21)

In conclusion I want to make it clear that I do not necessarily reject Dr Spender's claim that male authors in the early years of Australian literature lacked sophistication or subtlety and consciously or unconsciously backgrounded women authors, but these two later authors I have discussed in this paper do not deserve the same criticism. In fact, their achievements may endorse Dr Spender's judgment that it was the role of women writers to foster such desired 'subtlety'. Even allowing for the greater amplitude of Prichard's work in the international sphere, Cowan does not lack sophistication for he was associated with the University of Western Australia from 1938 when he enrolled for his Bachelor of Arts. He eventually became a lecturer there in 1958 and co-editor of the University's respected literary journal *Westerly*. In reference to the influences on him as a writer, it is interesting to note that he shared some of the same literary mentors as Prichard—as revealed in his 'Foreword' to *Short Story Landscape*, a book that became a school text throughout Australia:

The modern short story...can achieve the brilliant compression of Hemingway's *Old Man at the Bridge* or the allusiveness and complex play of symbolism of Kafka or Dudintsev. (Cowan, 1964, p. 1)

These two outstanding Australian writers today share the rare distinction and tribute of having writers' centres named after them. Prichard and Cowan demonstrate the rapid growth of sophistication in the youthful history of Australian writing. So perhaps we should just celebrate them and be thankful their works remain remarkably subtle and highly readable to this day.

Note

- 1 This was a paper presented to the 15th Biennial International Conference of Australian Studies in China ("Australia in the World: Past, Present and Future", 8-10th July 2016) held at Peking University, Beijing.

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About the author

Glen Phillips (glenlyp@bigpond.com) has taught at Edith Cowan University and its antecedents for some 55 years and is Founding Director of ECU's International Centre for Landscape and Language. He is an Australian poet, short story writer and novelist. His poetry collections include *Intersections*, (Perth, 1972), *Umbria-Australia*, *Green and Gold*, (Perugia, Italy, 1986, with Walter Cerquetti), *Poetry in Motion* (Perth, 1988, with three other WA poets who had formed in 1985 the well-known "Poetry in Motion" performance group), *Sacrificing the Leaves* (Bangkok, 1988), *Lovesongs, Lovescenes* (Perth, 1991), *Spring Burning* (Perth, 1999) and *Singing Granites* (Salcombe, UK, 2008, with Anne Born). He is represented in some 30 anthologies and has edited or published more than 50 books or chapbooks, 37 being collections of his own poetry. His poems have won prizes and have been translated into several languages. Six bi-lingual collections of his poems have been published in China and one in Italy. He has recited his poetry in USA, Britain, Italy, Spain, Denmark, Switzerland, India, Thailand, Singapore and China.

He has performed his poetry on Australian national television and radio and his work has been featured three times on ABC's *Poetica*. Studies of his poetry have been made in China, India and Australia. Born in Southern Cross (WA) in 1936, he currently lives in Perth. From 2014-2016 he published 25 poetry collections and has more books of verse and prose in preparation. Ten short stories have been published and he has completed his first fifty stories. He is currently working on several novellas and a novel. Glen has presented and published over 50 academic papers at conferences both nationally and internationally.