Sydney and Its Waterway in Australian Literary Modernism

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Literary Urban Studies

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Cover credit: Prasit photo/Getty Images

Map of the wharf accommodation of the Port of Sydney. Sydney: McCarron, Stewart & Co., Printers and Lithographers, 1913. National Library of Australia

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Introduction: Writing a City Built on Water

[W]e are well aware that the cities which are most resistant to signification and which incidentally often present difficulties of adaptation for the inhabitants are precisely the cities without water, the cities without seashore, without a surface of water, without a lake, without a river, without a stream: all these cities present difficulties of life, of legibility.

<div align="right">Roland Barthes, 'Semiology and the Urban' (1997: 416)</div>

Sydney has never lost awareness of her harbour. The shores have changed greatly in a hundred and sixty years. They are encrusted with buildings, the stony and precipitous growth of a city, the installations of a port, the barnacle thick dwellings of Woolloomooloo, the cascading red roofs of suburbia, or white walls and old stone amid the dark masses of trees; docks and oil tanks and silos, churches and convents; lighthouses and reservoirs … Streets like tributaries trickle down the steep slopes to the water. The skyline is resculptured by the uncoordinated creativeness of man. The harbour lies in the lap of the city. The water is still the same, as blue.

<div align="right">Marjorie Barnard, *The Sydney Book* (1947: 11)</div>

In an evocative poster commissioned by the Australian National Travel Association (ANTA) and designed by Tom Purvis for the Sesquicentenary celebrations of 1938, a male figure with chiselled, European features rises up from Sydney harbour (Fig. 1.1). With his right index finger raised,
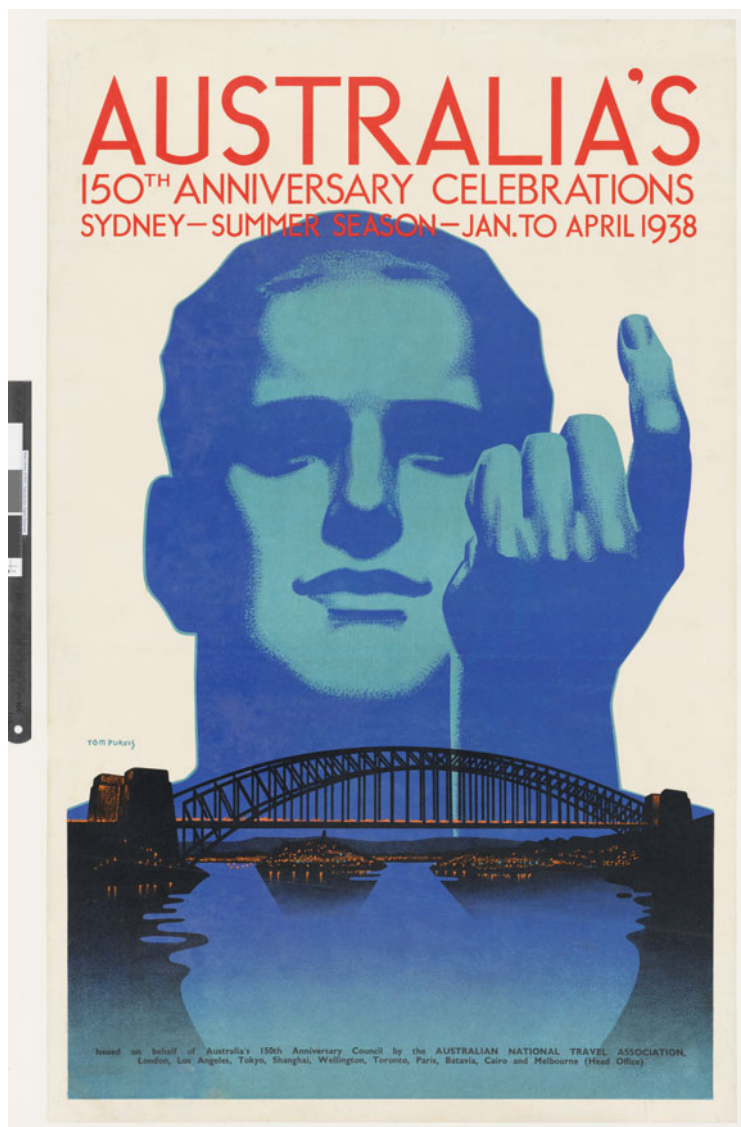
Fig. 1.1 Purvis, Tom. 'Australia's 150th anniversary celebrations Sydney—summer season—January to April 1938'. Issued on behalf of Australia's 150th anniversary Council by the Australian National Travel Association. State Library of New South Wales

the figure beckons the viewer into a bright blue future beyond the newly opened Harbour Bridge, which stretches across the poster in black and orange silhouette. Intended for distribution by ANTA offices in London, Los Angeles, Tokyo, Shanghai, Paris and Cairo, among other exotic locales, the poster speaks to white Australian masculinity and fitness, and the nation's achievements in technology and infrastructure. Through its seamless integration of body and landscape, the image shows how these qualities have allowed the nation to wrangle an environment that seemed so unforgiving to the invaders one hundred and fifty years previously. Purvis's design captures a moment of national self-reflection between the two world wars, when Sydney was marketed to the world as an emergent modern metropolis.

Just four years before the Sesquicentenary, Christina Stead's novel *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1934) was published by the London firm of Peter Davies. I would like to entertain for a moment a comparison between Purvis' poster and the first edition jacket of Stead's book, considering them as two design objects of similar provenance but vastly different perspective. The jacket, by an unknown designer, features a sand-coloured background overlaid with diffractive blue lines moving like waves beneath the title and author's name (Fig. 1.2). There is no order to these lines; they are randomly dispersed across the cover, resembling marks left upon the shore by the outgoing tide or the contour lines of a topographical map. The lines are actually produced from an accumulation of tiny dots and dashes, evoking the notion of wave-particle duality, of the 'two contradictory pictures of reality' popularised in the wake of Albert Einstein's work on general relativity (cited in Watson 2016: 191). The dust jacket is quintessentially modernist, appropriate for what can be considered the first modernist novel of Australia.

The two objects, poster and dust jacket, reflect their subject, Sydney, in very different ways. The former is designed to market the city to the world; the latter represents a narrative that, according to *The Newcastle Sun*, may 'not please' readers with the suggest that 'everything is not for the best in the best of all possible continents' (1934: 11). The poster has its origins in a state-sponsored, national tourist campaign; the jacket belongs to a Sydney book produced across three continents by a young, expatriate woman writer and published in London. Both summon the familiar correlation of Sydney with water; yet as Ivan Illich reminds us, water has 'a nearly unlimited ability to carry metaphors', but is always ambiguous, two-sided, 'a shifting mirror' (1985: 24–25). In Purvis's
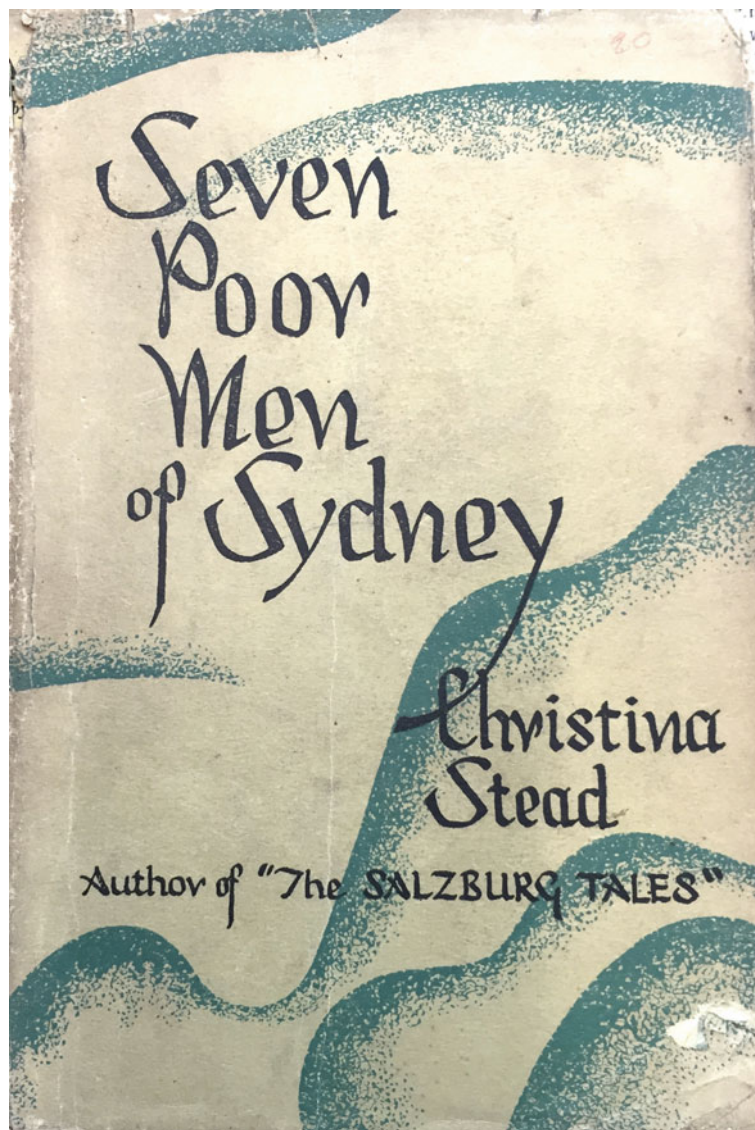
Fig. 1.2 Stead, Christina. *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*. London: Peter Davies, 1934

poster, the vector lines suggest the blue man has made and is in control of the blue environment. The Bridge spans the frame as a symbol of modernity's technological domination of nature. The Stead cover moves closer to the water; it reorients perspective. Its pattern of breaking waves suggests a more speculative and unpredictable energy.

Seen from the air or on a topographical map, the Sydney estuary branches like veins and capillaries from the city on its shores deep into the suburbs. It functions as a kind of symbolic life force, compensating for a city that has been thought formless and without history (Marshall 2001: 18). Sydney is an 'accidental' metropolis: wishing to avoid the troubles of the industrial, post-enclosures cities of his own nation, Phillip's plan was for a 'simple agrarian colony' called 'Albion' (Karskens 2009: 72). Though attempts were made to formalise the burgeoning settlement, for many years Sydney expanded largely at the behest of private developers and without much government oversight. Today, Greater Sydney sprawls more than one hundred kilometres west of the Central Business District. The waterway has always provided this haphazard, amorphous city with a cohesive identity.

Port Jackson, as the Sydney estuary is commonly known, is one of the largest in the world. From Sydney Harbour it flows up into Middle Harbour and south-western into the Lane Cove and Parramatta Rivers. Formed when the ocean rose up six thousand years ago and flooded the valley, the estuary gets its distinctively sinuous shape from its many bays and inlets, and its mix of sandy beaches and outcrops of Hawkesbury sandstone (Birch 2007: 216–17). For thousands of years, Aboriginal peoples have lived close to the water. The Sydney metropolitan area is home to more than twenty clan groups, known collectively by the settler-endowed name 'Eora', a word meaning 'people from here' (Attenbrow 2010: 24–26; Foley and Read 2020: 8–9). Sydney Cove is the unceded territory of the Cadigal (Gadigal) and Wangal clans, North Head of the Gai-mariagal people (Foley and Read 2020: 15, 9–10; Attenbrow 2010: 24–26). The Cove—Warrane—was a place of culture and industry for the Sydney clans, for meeting, ceremony and the making and perfecting of fishing equipment (Foley and Read 2020: 13–14). All along the shoreline there are rock engravings telling Eora stories—stories of fish and whales, kangaroos and boomerangs, humans and turtles (Derricourt 2010: 31).

The story of how the penal colony of New South Wales happened to be established at Warrane in 1788 is part of settler mythology. Arriving in Botany Bay, Governor Arthur Philip found little to recommend the

exposed, shallow location (Cathcart 2009: 11). He took a small crew and travelled north to an opening that Cook had noted but not entered ten years before. There Phillip found what the First Fleet's Surgeon-General, John White, called 'without exception, the finest and most extensive harbour in the universe' (2003). 'Here a Thousand Sail of the Line may ride in the most perfect Security', Phillip wrote back to Britain (Karskens 2009: 62). The estuary was for the English a 'semiotic *tabula rasa*', and they quickly filled it with the 'modern imperial culture' they brought with them (Ryan 1996: 105; Matthews 2005: 13). This was a culture underpinned by Enlightenment conviction that commercial empire was a progressive model of human sociality 'fundamentally in accord with nature itself, for the so-called trade winds make oceanic contact possible' (Muthu 2012: 203). Sydney, as Phillip named the small waterside settlement, was immediately integrated into the global network of colonial capitalism through ocean trade (Matthews 2005: 17–18).

By the late 1920s, Sydney Harbour was firmly established as the aesthetic and geopolitical locus of an emergent Australian modernity. Artists like Grace Cossington Smith, Roy de Maistre and Dorrit Black undertook the modernist colour experiments that would later become distinctive enough to warrant a title: the 'Sydney Moderns'. Art historians Deborah Edwards and Denise Mimmocchi suggest that these artists' distinctively luminous colour and bold shapes were inspired by their 'close proximity to Sydney's light-filled harbour' (2013: 13). As the site of British settlement and the nation's main link to the wider world, the waterway represented both the past and future of the city's civic identity. Early on the morning of 26 January 1938, crowds gathered to watch long-boats with a full complement of red-coated marines recreate Phillip's landing of one hundred and fifty years' previous. A small group of Aboriginal people were recruited to stand and watch in mute fascination as the Governor came ashore. From there, this settler colonial teleology was completed with a 'march to nationhood', in which floats representing the country's social and industrial achievements travelled through the city streets.[1] Here, the harbour served as the *fons et origo* of triumphant white modernity.

Today, the waterway is strangely doubled. By the 1960s, most of the shipping industry had moved to Botany Bay, and since 1958 the

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[1] Photographs and descriptions of the parade can be seen in *The Home* 18, no 3 (1938).

contentious Cahill Expressway has cut through the city and limited its connection to the waterfront. Tourists come, but very few Sydneysiders can afford to live anywhere near the water, which after two centuries of settlement is now one of the most contaminated bodies of water in the world (Mayer-Pinto et al. 2015: 1091). Yet, the myth of the 'finest harbour in the universe' persists. In his recent work of narrative non-fiction, *The Harbour* (2017), Scott Bevan calls the waterway the 'city's heart' and the 'country's soul'. On the first page alone, Bevan associates the harbour with belonging, desire, longing, safety and shelter (1). Sydney still understands itself, geographically and symbolically, 'built on water' (Barnard 1947: 6). No wonder, then, that the city's logo is an anchor.

This book explores the myth and the reality of Sydney's connection to its waterway through close examination of literary representations produced in the years between the wars, a period of rapid civic development and cultural change in the city. It is arranged as case studies of five exemplary novels written by women and published between 1934 and 1947: Christina Stead's *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1934), Dymphna Cusack's *Jungfrau* (1936), *Waterway* (1938) by Eleanor Dark, *Foveaux* (1939) by Kylie Tennant, and *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* (1947; 1983) by Marjorie Barnard and Flora Eldershaw, writing as M. Barnard Eldershaw. Each case study offers in-depth analysis of the works' formal and aesthetic innovations in the context of global urban and modernist literatures, while also positioning each novel as an anchor point for broader exploration of various literary, cultural and social currents that flowed through Sydney at the time. Vastly different in tone, form and purpose, the five novels all share an interest in the complexities of urban modernity, and in the conceptual, formal and aesthetic possibilities of writing the city through water.

The writers chart their imagined Sydney according to the topography of the estuary. Writes Eleanor Dark in *Waterway*:

> More than once upon her expeditions about the city and its suburbs she had felt a sudden started recognition of its ubiquitousness; down there near the Heads, she thought, you lived at its very source, but when your tram or bus plunged out from between some tangle of shops or houses in Mosman or Cremorne, a glimpse of it below you took you by surprise. … [Y]ou were always meeting it somewhere, crossing it by one bridge or another; you had seen it from the window of a cottage in Middle Harbour, from the top of some dingy street in Woolloomooloo, from the roof of flats

in Darlinghurst, from the balcony of a house in Drummoyne. (Dark 1990: 188)

For Dark, the waterway is 'vitally a part of the city … entangled in one way or another with the lives of its inhabitants' (1990: 188). Its 'surprising ubiquitousness' knits together a city of contrasts, from the exclusive waterside mansions of Mosman and Cremorne on the lower North Shore, to the embryonic suburbs of Middle Head, the 'dingy' docklands of Woolloomooloo, the new apartments that replaced the slums of Darlinghurst, and finally to what was then the outer suburb of Drummoyne.

In each of the novels, the waterway is 'vitally entangled' with human society and the built environment in both banal and sublime ways. The writers' literary maps of the city favour watery and littoral places, locations that afford engagement with various forces shaping modern Sydney: international capitalism, global interchange of goods and ideas, the competing demands of nature and culture in urban development and the complex debts of colonialism. South Head, where the landmass meets the ocean and Phillip first landed, is in the fiction a site of spatial transition and temporal rupture, a place where city and world, past and future intersect. Circular Quay and the docks of Woolloomooloo show a busy working port structured by commercial capitalism and ocean trade, but closer to the shore these systems beget pollution and poverty. Dark describes 'the ships spewing out their dirty water into [the harbour], stewards emptying their buckets of garbage, tourists throwing the bottles of their last carousal out of the portholes' (1990: 144). Stead writes of 'poor children … and their mothers' raking through shoreline debris left by the high tide, 'gathering coke, chips, even vegetables thrown overboard in port from the vessels' (2015: 71–72). Tennant's *Foveaux* follows 'invisible' water flowing through drains and pipes in the city's slums, tracing the connections between water infrastructure, civic politics and geometries of urban power. In Sydney, explain geographers Davies and Wright, this is a history of 'tragedy, foresight, protectionism and social upheaval' (Gandy 2014: 3; Davies and Wright 2014: 450).

What about below the surface, the watery depths themselves? Paradoxically, in the novels this is the space most burdened by signification and seemingly also the most resistant to it. This waterway is a 'lovely estuary' or a 'waste of water'; it is 'dull silver like a misted blade' or a 'long and shining finger of the sea' (Stead 2015: 74, 256; Dark 1990:

36). It is pure and polluted, a primal force and an unsettled historical archive, a space of spiritual 'security and anchorage' or a baroque tyrant meting out death and suffering (Dark 1990: 188). Ultimately, the waterway's meaning is unfixed, dynamically changeable. Hydrology also affords dynamic aesthetic and narrative opportunities. The estuary is tidal, its mix of fresh and saltwater is constantly renewed. It is both open and closed to the wider world via the Pacific Ocean and holds its past in silt and suspended sediment (Mayer-Pinto et al. 2015: 1093). In the novels, these hydrologic features manifest as centrifugal narrative structures, city space traversed by rhythms of vernacular speech and restless feet, multi-perspectival narration, and braided or layered temporalities. The estuary's hydrology also accords with the novels' mix of aesthetic, discursive and ideological allegiances and influences. This produces representations of the city energised by lively interaction between sometimes combative forces and forms. For instance, read Christina Stead's description of a bright morning in Circular Quay:

> Coloured spokes and plates whirling past on cars in the street were confounded with the wake of the morning ferry, boiling silver, and the oily eddies at the side, with flakes of blinding light, like a dragon in plate-mail. (86)

Stead's ebullient linguistic flourishes reflect her delight in the dynamic scenery, but verb-noun combinations such as 'boiling silver', 'oily eddies' and 'blinding light' subtly suggest arrested movement and potentially dangerous excess. A generous reading of the 'dragon in plate-mail' simile attributes it to the mythical air with which Stead imbues elements of her hometown; otherwise, it is forced, awkward artifice, evidence that something about the young city remains impervious to narration. This is writing with the waterway through language choice, layering joy and despair, excess and ruination in swirling eddies of description.

In 1947 Marjorie Barnard was commissioned to write the text for *The Sydney Book*, a small volume of etchings of the city by arts publisher Sydney Ure Smith. Barnard's brief impressions of Sydney and urban life more broadly are illuminative, often evocative and sometimes remarkably prescient; thus, I refer often to them throughout this book. In the volume's concluding pages, Barnard writes:

> It is not easy to see a great city as a whole, in one *coup d'oeil*. There are maps and plans, but they only tell a part of the story. It is not in the form of a blueprint that a city makes its impact on the imagination. A plan is static, immobile, but the city itself is always in flux, changeable, full of moods and whims. (1947: 26)

If a map or blueprint only tells 'part of the story', then what form best reflects the city in all its 'flux'? For writers of the interwar generation, only the novel could 'synthesise the disparate ethical, historical and political knowledges of the present' (Carter 2013: 180). As Barnard Eldershaw write in *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, the novel is an 'elastic, free, inclusive form', capable of engaging with 'large, rich, confused, intricate' phenomena (1983: 73). One such phenomenon was the modern city, figured in the novels as a space in which nation, world, race, gender, class and capitalism coalesce and collide.

In *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015), Caroline Levine positions narratives as 'valuable heuristic forms', because they 'can set in motion multiple social forms and track them as they co-operate, come into conflict, and overlap, without positing an ultimate cause' (19). For Levine, the world is 'jam-packed' with forms—social, political, aesthetic, material—that regularly come into contact and enable, disrupt or neutralise each other. In this context, literary form lays claim to its own 'organizing power', for it can stage encounters between forms that limit the authority of some and activate the latent affordances of others (7). Levine's framework is useful for thinking through the relation between the city, the waterway and the novel upon which this book relies. Harnessing the novel's capacity to track forms as they 'cross and collide' (Levine 2015: 122), and tapping into the aesthetic possibilities of the city built on water, the writers considered by this study present an Australian urban modernity of material emplacement in an unpredictably watery sphere, where history settles and sediments, multiple ideological schemas flow into one another, and relations between bodies, space and power generation constant contestation. In doing so, they pioneer a mode of writing geographically, temporally and aesthetically specific to the provincial modernity of Sydney.

Modernism in the Estuary

Sydney, its Waterway and Australian Literary Modernism aims to engage with the myth and the reality of Sydney Harbour, with water as both metaphor *and* matter. Accordingly, I draw on work from what is variously known as the 'new thalassology', 'blue cultural studies', or 'hydro-criticism' (Mentz 2009a: xi; 96; Winkiel 2019: 1).[2] In literary studies, this turn towards the aqueous and oceanic reads bodies of texts via bodies of water, with the latter understood as both material, historicised entities and long-standing opportunities for poetic and narrative engagement with a changing world. In *The Novel and the Sea* (2010), Margaret Cohen argues that the practice of maritime 'craft' informed the 'plain style' of written accounts like Cook's of his wreck on the Great Barrier Reef, which in turn inspired the narrative form and poetics of the modern novel. As Cohen explains, 'craft' is the skillset that allows the 'compleat mariner' to undertake 'path-breaking explorations' and navigate safely through marine elements of 'flux, danger, and destruction' (4). Novelists beginning with Defoe adapted the strategies of craft to develop new modes of narrative fiction, allowing readers to also exercise their 'craft' via a 'well-oiled narrative chain of problem-solving' (8). Cohen argues that the influence of 'craft' extends to works outside of the adventure genre. In domestic fiction like Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), protagonists at 'edge zones' and readers alike must employ 'craft' as they navigate uncharted social and narrative territories (13). In delivering this alternate history of the modern novel, Cohen's aim is to encourage revision of the 'long-standing prejudices that those processes and events defining the modern novel occur on land' (13). Steve Mentz's study of Shakespeare's theatrical engagements with the ocean attends not only to the maritime sphere but to water as material element. *At the Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean* (2009a) argues convincingly that for Shakespeare, the ocean is both 'a nearly inconceivable physical reality and a mind-twisting force for change and instability' (x). In the plays, the sea is both an impetus for and a challenge to poetic form (11).

The oceanic turn in conjunction with transnational and regional paradigms of the new modernist studies has produced a 'modernism at sea', with critics exploring how oceans and oceanic traffic inflect work produced in the context of crumbling empires and rapidly

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[2] See also Mentz, 'Towards a Blue Cultural Studies' (2009b).

changing configurations of time and space (Winkiel 2019: 7). John Brannigan develops an 'archipelagic modernism', rereading canonical urban modernists James Joyce and Virginia Woolf outside of the metropolis and in the context of the archipelago, the coastline and the sea. This non-urban approach, Brannigan argues, yields a 'cosmopolitan geography of uncertain boundaries' (2015: 72). In a recent piece for the 'hydro-criticism' special issue of *English Language Notes* (2019), Harris Feinsod offers a model of comparative modernism structured by the Panama Canal. At the height of twentieth-century modernism, the narrow, artificial shipping route that connects the Pacific and Atlantic oceans via the Isthmus of Panama was deeply striated by class, capitalism and colonial violence. Feinsod traces modernist engagements with the Canal that portray it variously as a place of trade and tourism, injury and death. Thus, for Feinsod the Canal exemplifies a model of transnational modernism 'at once connected by intensifying flows and fortified by proliferating blockages' (2019: 117). 'In all the coastal nations of the modernizing world', Feinsod argues, 'often-discarded works of literature and art … attest to this push and pull of connection and blockage and string its tension along several axes of identity and difference' (117).

Feinsod's assertion of a modernism characterised by both connection and blockage accords with the critical history and model of Australian modernism I invoke in the title of this book. Consider an early passage from Stead's *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* that epitomises a modernism of simultaneous flow and obstruction:

> Early in the morning, through the open window, the people hear the clatter of anchors falling into the bay, and the little boys run out to name the liners waiting there for the port doctor, liners from Singapore, Shanghai, Nagasaki, Wellington, Hawaii, San Francisco, Naples, Brindisi, Dunkirk and London, in the face of all these old stone houses, decayed weatherboard cottages, ruinous fences, boathouses and fishermen's shanties. Presently a toot, the port doctor puts out in the *Hygeia*; a whistle, the Customs launch goes alongside; a hoot from the Point, and that is the pilot-ship returning to its anchorage. A bell jangles on the wharf where the relief pilot waits for his dinghy, and the ferry whistles to clear the dinghies, rowing-boats and children's canoes from its path. The fishermen murmur round the beach-path, fishing-nets dry in the sun, a bugle blows in the camp, the inspected ships draw up their anchors and go off up the harbour, superb with sloping masts, or else, in disgrace, flying the yellow

flag, to the rightabout, with nose in air, to Quarantine, under North Head and its bleak graveyard. (2015: 1–2)

In Virginia Woolf's 'Docks of London' (1931), ships from Australia arrive on the Thames at the behest of the English consumer, who demands products—like 'woollen overcoats'—produced by invisible colonial labour (2009: 198). 'It is we', Woolf writes, '—our tastes, our fashions, our needs—that make the cranes dip and swing, that call the ships from the sea' (2009: 198). Writing from the 'other direction', Stead's configuration flips the trajectory Woolf observes: London is last stop in a vast network of trading ports (Morrison 2013: 1). For Fiona Morrison, Stead offers 'an antipodean decentring of imperial hierarchies', challenging 'the familiar national canons and canonical temporalities of modernism' (2013: 2). Accordingly, in Stead's description the waterway is jostled by ocean liners, pilot-ships, dinghies and children's canoes, vessels whose differing speeds and capacities reflect an asynchronous modernism of different temporalities and priorities. At the end of the passage, the international liners are either accepted into the harbour, 'superb with sloping masts', or rejected and sent to Quarantine 'under North Head and its bleak graveyard'. This is an image of both exchange and obstacle; Stead's is a 'critical cosmopolitanism' (Walkowitz 2006). Thus, the passage models modernism understood as a 'capacious and self-reflexive problem space' (Saint-Amour 2018: 441).

A traditional reading of Australian modernism stresses, as a critic wrote as recently as 2016, its 'eccentricity and its improbability, its untimeliness and its abortiveness—even, and perhaps especially, that lingering question about whether it ever existed at all' (Moody 2016). It is true that high modernism was viewed with suspicion by some scions of Australian literature and art. In the 1920s, Jack Lindsay denounced European modernism in art as a 'retreat to decadence, to the uncivilised, a celebration of the primitive and the childish and a direct assault by charlatans and Jews on the finest traditions of Western art' (Croft 1988: 410). Tanya Dalziell notes that Nettie Palmer's *Modern Australian Literature 1900–1923*, published in 1924, actually produced a 'nationalist idea of the modern' that was 'increasingly seen from the 1920s onwards … as hostile to modernism' (2007: 771). More directly, in their *Essays on Australian Literature* (1938) Barnard Eldershaw blasted the 'naturalistic ramblings' of Joyce and Gertrude Stein as 'exasperating and antipathetic to the average intelligence' (113).