

Citation WMcR

In judging the Walter McRae Russell I was joined by my fellow judges Roger Osborne and Christina Spittel, and I'd formally like to thank them here. We would like to acknowledge at the outset what you might suspect already - the strong field of literary critical work for the years 2015-2016. We would like to highlight a few aspect of this field:

- strong work by ECR scholars,
- wide-ranging and ever more compelling work on indigenous writing
- continued provocations for Australian literary studies in light of the transnational turn
- strong single-author studies

The Walter McCrae Russell Award is “to be given to the best book of literary scholarship on an Australian subject published in the preceding two calendar years’. By unanimous and strong acclamation, the judging panel has decided that this award be given to Elizabeth McMahon for her monograph *Islands, Identity and the Literary Imagination* published by Anthem Press in 2016.

A few years ago, I remember trotting up the central staircase of the Woolley Building at the University of Sydney to get to the Common Room to hear Elizabeth McMahon give a paper on the work she had undertaken while at the University of Tasmania. I remember this event quite clearly - she spoke from a chair arranged, rather unusually, in ‘lyric mode’, in front of the long bank of windows on western wall of room. It was an absolutely entrancing paper and it was the forerunner, of this, an absolutely entrancing book.

In this monograph, Elizabeth McMahon elegantly (and with tremendous and lightly-exercised authority) asks Island Studies to speak to Australian literary studies, and by extension, the world. As the medial point between diffuse archipelago and the monadic continent, Australia (as the anomalous island continent) is the testing and proving ground of her beautifully integrated work on islands, both real and imagined, and it is difficult to underestimate the importance of this work for Australian literary studies, for world literary studies and for Island studies, in turn.

Enviably synthesised at concept, structure and sentence level, *Islands, Identity and the Literary Imagination* allows the figure of the island to works its ineffable magic –

- we consider the ongoing resonance of Donne’s rhetorical golden egg - ‘no man is an island’ and the meanings of the revival of this phrase in the 1940s,
- we think through, (in my case for the first time (properly) the island-centred relations between Australia and the Caribbean as the first and last of the new worlds, which examines “the epistemic shifts within the era of ‘world history’” and the management of concepts of planet, world and globe. We move into and through the symbolic and rhetorical geographies of 4 key Nobel Laureate winners – White, Walcott, Naipaul and Coetzee - before the study takes us into masterful readings of Australian and West Indian literature, with particular showcase for West Indian women writers.

In a set of concluding chapters Elizabeth McMahon then reads “the proliferation of shipwreck literature during the colonial period as a symptom of the impending accident at the heart of empire” – which produces exhilarating and eye-opening readings of the historical and literary dimensions of the scene of shipwreck. Not content to rest on her readerly laurels at this point, Elizabeth McMahon finishes with a *tour de force* – a deconstructive reading of the binaries of island and continent, utopia and dystopia, land and sea - thereby allowing us to

see the pressing material as well as figurative dimensions of islands and island life. Fittingly, the final note is given to the Torres Strait islands – so that, what in colonial terms might be seen as the very acme of the margin of the margin, becomes the central way in which to think our way out of the very colonial binary that strangles a global interconnectedness crucial to flourishing and indeed survival.

In this room, we all know, of course that it is fitting that such a masterful thinker and reader in the field of Australian literary studies as Elizabeth McMahon should pose a series of vital and original questions to the world literary space. Would you join me in congratulating her on her award tonight.