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John F. Williams, *The quarantined culture: Australian reactions to modernism 1913–1939*, Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, pp 288 and 18 plates

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John Williams is a photographer of distinction, an academic as well, both teaching and administering at the Sydney College of Arts, and more recently he has pursued another interest -- History. To some extent this book is a result of the combination of those many skills.

At first glance one might wonder what such a book had to do with military affairs. True, modernism is still a huge topic of discussion in many fields of the humanities; and even in what is now largely and perhaps too easily accepted by many as the post-modern, modernism still causes considerable discussion. Indeed, that is one of the underpinning tenets of Williams' book. He seems to accept that we are post-modern readers and writers, and so we are looking back at the modernist movement(s) to reassess, to analyse our own past(s) over and over again.

The past focussed on in this book is that of Australia from about 1880 to 1939, though as the sub-title suggests the strict focus is from 1913 to 1939. The lynchpin of the book is the Great War, and how it both focussed Australia's reaction to and was focussed on through, by and about modernism.

At the beginning let me say that this is a very important book. Essential. It is finely written, in fact a very easy and convincing style; clear, punchy, elegant and yet linguistically complex enough to discuss its issues well. And while it nods to a knowledge of the post-modern its style is never clouded by the worst excesses of the theoretically inclined. Though a small carp: saying that the book is post-modern is not quite the same as using the most recent of theoretical styles or methods. True, most of us know enough of this stuff, often osmotically taken up from the milieu rather than fully applied. Williams knows more than the superficial but he might have used just a little more theory here and there.

That aside, Williams' thesis is clearly put and logically argued. The Great War and the construction of the ANZAC legend via Bean and others combined with a certain trend in the Australian art world effectively to sideline modernism in Australia. To quarantine it, in fact. He contends that while the foundation of the Australian identity in 'bush legend' derived from Lawson, and had an impact from the 1880s onwards, it was at Federation no longer as viable as it had been a decade before. International movements in the plastic arts, design and to some extent in literature were well known and being analysed in the Australian press, and by those touring the old country and Europe. Indeed, the urbanisation of the Australian identity was well underway and far from being universally denigrated. Modernism for Williams is far broader than an art movement: it is economic, industrial and psychological as well. All are intimately entwined.

Before the Great War some aspects of Edwardian culture had indeed been open to the 'new', and not (reworking Robert Hughes) to its shock but as a welcome filip to the new

country, or better put to the newly urbanising nation. But here's the rub, others were hard at work trying to avert modernism's trendiness (as they saw it), its un-aesthetic nature, its industrialisation and fixation with the machine, and its basic superficial newness. It was not for Australia.

In Williams' retelling of the various strands of this story, the villains are strongly opposed to modernism while being for the old fashioned landscape and bushman imaginary. As he outlines it, for a variety of reasons they also had the ears, eyes and other organs of the greater public's awareness at their disposal, and they used them to close off not merely debate but access to the new.

Chief among Williams' anti-modernist villains are various members of the Lindsay family, Lionel pre-eminently, but Norman gets a fair serve, not least as a less-than-wondrous artist and draughtsman despite (or perhaps because of) the lushness of his nudes. And while lush is my word it seems appropriate to the tone directed at him by Williams. Streeton, while not held to be a necessarily intentional villain, provided a series of social texts in the post-Great War reconstruction of what Williams' contends was already passe -- the bushman and landscape tradition.

Others get lesser degrees of villainy charged to them, though J.S. MacDonald, as director of national galleries in New South Wales and Victoria sequentially, is held, rightly I think, to be a major quarantiner of anything new. Talent in his chosen areas (mostly, Williams suggests, the older 'classic' painters) he may have possessed, but he was hostile to innovation and seemed actively to distort national taste to fit his own narrow concerns.

Outside the art world the major villain of the piece is C.E.W. Bean, whose work forms the backbone of the book. Williams' analysis of the construction of the ANZAC legend is not altogether new, here and there it's a little summary, and there's a need for more literary detail to fill out both the history and art scenes, but these are quibbles, since the book cannot do everything (and it's a literary historian, me, with a vested interest who's making this charge). The point more importantly is that this version of Bean as war correspondent, then official historian, demonstrates the interpenetration of the social construction of the military aspect of Australian character into the wider social fabric.

Soldiery, as Williams sees Bean write it, allied to the landscape boys, knowingly and deliberately knocks out modernist notions of society and identity from 1915 to at least the 1929 crash. It was then, for many, as it is now still for many others, a lamentable curtailment of choice. Still it's not my place here to more than hint at how relevant much of this material is to the vista of present military attitudes penetrating the wider social fabric of the 1990s.

On this earlier penetration Williams' evidence is wide ranging: from art of course, but equally interesting are his examples of how soldier settlement schemes linked to wider (indeed, world-wider) economic issues, and both imperial British and wider world attitudes linked to trade alliances and race. A careful reader like Williams lays up some very nice foundations for how the world so easily walked into the Second after the lessons of the Great War.

Not the least alliance here is between a world so intent on redressing and repossessing nationalistic boundaries of culture and geography with their perceived need to define

racial boundaries as economic necessities. Bean's impact on the Bruce government is but our local example of the way rewriting the Great War as an anti-modernist lesson occurred throughout many of the Allied and Axis powers alike. Building on this analysis, some of Williams' observations about the so-called 'lost generation' are startling in originality, conviction and in the sheer quality of the insights provided. I'll be thinking through a number of them for some years.

Throughout, too, Williams makes references to the gender biases in the art world, though his nod to this issue is not his strongest suit; at times I felt more wide-ranging analysis needed to be done, but his line of thought is clear enough. While numerically dominant after the war, women leaned to those areas of art style which were socially at least disfavoured. Modernist they may have been but this is what sidelined them. How long was it before Grace Cossington-Smith and Thea Proctor, among others, got the status they merited? In effect, the alliance of Bean and upper-class arty types drove Australia into the arms of the working class doldrums of sport and entertainment as surrogates for thinking of any kind. And we thought Super League was a new diversion!

At the same time, this line of attack is refracted by a general hint about how the arguments were driven by class, migration and ethno-religious prejudice: that is, quite specifically by anti-semitism. Anything remotely modern was seen as a part of the Jewish conspiracy to undermine and dominate the West. The constant carping of the anti-modernists that they were not anti-Semitic while they sledged the Jew has a few modern parallels, alas. Some of it would have been well heard in the Germany of the 1930s, as Williams allows the reader to glean. And what has changed, we might ask?

While shuddering at how deep-seated Australian racism is, I would have liked a little more discussion of the class aspect. I accept the argument on the whole but feel that there was so much more to say and add in support. For instance, a discussion of the print media's handling of the soldier imagery via, say, popular poetry would have demonstrated that the nexus between city, industry and working class was being smoke-screened to avoid facing the gradual production of urban factories and slums. Fuelled by an appeal to the nation as an idealised though huge collection of small farms, the nation bought the imagery while living in the cities, or as others have shown, at best began to move into the suburban-farm surrogacy of the quarter-acre block. C.J. Dennis's sentimental bloke as poem and film of the 1920s and then the Dad and Dave films of 1930s all appealed to this notion of the small family farm as the Australian ideal.

As evidence it does not alter the argument, but it adds more weight and opens more nuances into the 1930s. But I carp about adding more evidence to an already detailed book overflowing with the gravitas of thoroughly thought-out research. This is first rate stuff.