



archives

Issue Three

**Andrew Riemer, *Sandstone Gothic: Confessions of an Accidental Academic* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1998)
\$17.95, ISBN 1 86448 626 0**

Douglas McQueen-Thomson

Andrew Riemer's latest memoir, *Sandstone Gothic*, is an infuriating book. Throughout, Riemer portrays himself as a passive protagonist against whom events have conspired. His tone is sour, embittered and resentful as he describes the misfortunes he endured in becoming an 'accidental academic'. The resulting book is an agonising, protracted document of self-justification.

Riemer's account is perplexing and frustrating mainly because of his refusal to acknowledge his own agency. He represents himself as an innocent who struggles meekly against unscrupulous scoundrels and deceptive careerists. Riemer seems to have been incapable of taking direct action as events unfolded around him. This inclination towards quietude reflects a broader shortcoming in Riemer's recollections: his inability to situate individual actions within a wider social and cultural context. For example, when Riemer has a miserable time doing his PhD thesis, he attributes this to being 'tricked' into the topic rather than to the dreary, arid nature of his chosen field: dull textual and biographical archive work. Riemer wouldn't see the humour in Walter Scott's fictitious dedicatee, Dr Jonas Dryasdust.

Fortunately, the book has other virtues. It sits ambiguously between two different genres. On one hand, it is a personal memoir, telling of an individual's confrontations with adversity. On the other hand, it is an institutional history. Riemer's subject matter is his own relationship with English studies, beginning in 1956 with his time as an undergraduate at Sydney University, moving on to postgraduate study in London, then finishing with his retirement from academia in 1994. And it is this material on the development of English studies that sets *Sandstone Gothic* apart from other failed autobiographies.

This book contributes to the expanding enterprise of historicising English studies, examining the relationship between the practice of literary studies and its status as a cultural institution. In its idiosyncratic and informal manner, *Sandstone Gothic* adds to the seminal descriptions of the emergence and development of English studies given by Terry Eagleton, Francis Mulhern, Chris Baldick and Gerald Graff.[1] More specifically, this book is a contribution to the growing field of histories of English studies in Australia.[2]

Riemer devotes a large part of *Sandstone Gothic* to describing the now-infamous split of the Sydney University English Department in the mid-sixties into a Leavisite-inspired 'A-Course' and a 'B-Course' that concentrated on textual and historical scholarship. Riemer describes this dispute as the intended result of plotting by S.L. Goldberg and his acolytes. According to Riemer, blind reformism and ideological narrowness from Goldberg reduced respectable academics to paranoid rivalry. However, Riemer's analysis depends on emphasising personality at the expense of broader institutional and social forms.

Sandstone Gothic struggles vainly to turn Riemer's own experience of emotional flux into the official version of what happened at Sydney University. His strain against other versions is almost audible; he is posing an implicit challenge to (among others) John Docker's explanation that the split resulted from an incompatibility between the intellectual traditions of Sydney and those transplanted from Melbourne.[3] And this subject matter is why the book has generated such controversy and interest. It has even provoked a number of other eyewitnesses to the Sydney University English schism to publish their own counter-records of 'what really happened'.[4]

Sandstone Gothic's genre ambiguity can be very confusing. It allows Riemer to consider the discipline of English through the unreliable cipher of personal memory and impression rather than through verifiable research. It excuses Riemer from the rigours of more historical scholarship, and grants him liberty to indulge his petty grudges and discontents. Riemer's most extraordinary resentment is directed at the renowned Shakespearean Samuel Schoenbaum. After suggesting that his PhD was maliciously derailed by Schoenbaum, Riemer relates that Schoenbaum did not pay his portion of petrol money on a shared trip from London to France in the 1960s. *Sandstone Gothic* would have been much improved if Riemer's memory for detail was used more for recalling the social and cultural forces that were transforming literary studies.

Sandstone Gothic also displays a strange fascination with F.R. Leavis. This places the book in another context: that of a resurgence in retrospectives on the work of F.R. Leavis and the phenomenon of Leavisism. Now that the heat generated by Leavisites has largely dissipated, many writers are reflecting on the contributions and shortcomings of F.R. Leavis. *Sandstone Gothic* comes on the heels of two large biographies of F.R. Leavis.[5]

Riemer speaks of Leavisism as though it had been transplanted root and trunk from the Mother Country. He fails to appreciate the characteristics that distinguished Australian Leavisism from its British counterpart. For example, Australian Leavisism came to hold a hegemonic position in Australian literary culture while British Leavisism was always marginal and oppositional. Terry Collits suggests that the scale of difference makes 'Goldbergism' a more accurate descriptor than Australian Leavisism.[6]

Riemer's Leavis-fixation is curious, considering the distaste Riemer feels for Leavis' evangelical fervour and moral certitude. However, there is a striking commonality between the two: a shared cultural pessimism. Both hold dear the idea that the modern world is in decline, and express deep nostalgia for lost halcyon days. For Riemer these were the days of pure, disinterested scholarship in neo-Gothic buildings; for Leavis they were the days before the modern 'dissociation of sensibility', where thoughts and feelings were identical.

Both forms of nostalgia are the product of disenchantment, and both approach the present with apprehension and misunderstanding. One can only hope that Riemer's next instalment of autobiography will be able to engage in a more positive way with present conditions, and will transcend the myopic self-absorption which blighted *Sandstone Gothic*.

Endnotes

[1] See Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* 2nd edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), Chapter 1 - 'The Rise of English,' pp. 15-46; Francis Mulhern, *The Moment of 'Scrutiny'* (London: New Left Books, 1979); Chris Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism 1842-1932* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); and Gerald Graff *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). [Return to endnote reference.](#)

[2] For other examples, see Leigh Dale, *The English Men: Professing Literature in Australian Universities* (Toowoomba: Association for the Study of Australian Literature,

1997); and John Docker, *In a Critical Condition: Reading Australian Literature* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1984). [Return to endnote reference.](#)

[3] Docker, John, *Australian Cultural Elites: Intellectual Traditions in Sydney and Melbourne* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1974), p. 130. [Return to endnote reference.](#)

[4] See, among others, Terry Collits, 'Sydney Revisited: Literary Struggles in Australia (circa 1965 and ongoing)', *Australian Book Review* 210 (May 1999), pp. 23-28; Jillian Dellit, 'Another Perspective on Andrew Riemer's *Sandstone Gothic*' *Australian Humanities Review* (September 1998), <http://www.lamp.ac.uk/ahr/emuse/riemer/dellit.html> [accessed on 31 May 1999]; Stephen Knight, *Australian Humanities Review* (September 1998), <http://www.lamp.ac.uk/ahr/archive/Issue-September-1998/knight2.html>, [accessed on 31 May 1999]; Peter Nicholls, n.t. *Australian Book Review* 211 (June 1999), p. 4; and John Wiltshire, 'Fault Lines' *Eureka Street* 8:10 (December 1998), pp. 38-42. [Return to endnote reference.](#)

[5] See Ian MacKillop, *F.R. Leavis: A Life in Criticism* (London: Penguin, 1997); G. Singh, *F.R. Leavis: A Literary Biography* (London: Duckworth, 1995). Other significant contributions to Leavis studies include a special commemorative issue of *Cambridge Quarterly* 25:4 (1996); and a 500-page bibliography, M.B. Kinch, *F.R. Leavis and Q.D. Leavis: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland, 1989). [Return to endnote reference.](#)

[6] Collits, Terry, 'Sydney Revisited: Literary Struggles in Australia (circa 1965 and ongoing)', *Australian Book Review* 210 (May 1999), p. 25. [Return to endnote reference.](#)

[about](#) | [current](#) | [archives](#) | [resources](#) | [acknowledgements](#) | [debate](#) | [papers](#) | [contact](#)

This page has been approved by the [Colloquy Editors](#).

Last Date Modified : 30 September 2000 - [Caution](#) - [Monash Home](#)