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Australian Feminist Studies 23:58 (2008); 435-450

This is an electronic version of an article published in *Australian Feminist Studies 23.58 (2008): 435-450*.

Australian Feminist Studies is available online at:
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08164640802433324>

Graphically Gendered: A Quantitative Study of the Relationships between Australian Novels and Gender from the 1830s to the 1930s

By Katherine Bode

The rediscovery, reclamation and revisioning of women's writing have been major features of feminist literary criticism since the 1970s, especially in the 1980s and early 1990s. A particular focus in the Australian context has been on the recovery and rereading of women novelists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a period identified as foundational in producing and defining Australian cultural and literary traditions, and the gender constructions informing those traditions. Before this revisionist project, as Fiona Giles observes, 'it was widely accepted that there were no [Australian] women writers in the nineteenth century' (1998, 1). Some early twentieth-century women novelists (such as Miles Franklin and Katharine Susannah Prichard) were 'prominent figures in Australian popular cultural memory (however much they have been neglected by the literary academy)' (Sheridan 1995, viii). But most have been excluded from cultural memory and Australian literary history. Feminist scholarship of the past three decades has created a greater awareness of the presence of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Australian women writers, while challenging the parameters of literary history (for instance, by discussing romance authors). Gradually, a general picture of the position and history of Australian women novelists has emerged from feminist literary scholarship; namely, women novelists were a significant presence in the nineteenth century, but became particularly prominent in the first few decades of the twentieth century.

This paper aims to continue and expand, while critiquing aspects of, previous feminist analyses of authors and authorship in Australia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The majority of such studies have focused on particular women writers and/or on aspects of their fiction. I consider the number and proportion of published novel titles by Australian men and women from 1830 (when publication of Australian novels effectively began) to 1939 to determine whether and what gender trends emerge.¹ This study also departs from the majority of previous explorations of Australian literary history (including feminist accounts of that history) in not pre-emptively selecting the authors or texts considered. Rather, I explore gender trends in relation to all Australian novel titles published before 1939. Thus, some of the authors included in this study published one novel, some many; some wrote what Gayle Tuchman (1989) describes as the 'high culture novel', others published in genres such as romance, action, fantasy, science fiction and crime. Some of these novel titles were read by thousands of people; others by only a handful. Traditional paradigms of literary analysis would regard many of the texts and authors considered in this paper as unimportant. My contention is that only by considering the entire spectrum of texts and authors can we determine the ways in which gender impacts on the publication of Australian novels, and on constructions of Australian literary history. I have also attempted – unlike many past studies of Australian literary history, but in accordance with current directions in the field – to explore trends in Australian literature in the context of other-national literary trends. Given Australia's close relationship with Britain in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I have focused on the ways in which British constructions of authorship and the novel influenced the Australian field.

My focus on the relationship between gender and authorship, and on constructions of

that relationship in Australian literary history, particularly in feminist accounts, means that the results of this study offer no insight into the important differences among female (and male) novelists, or regarding representations of gender within the texts themselves. I have made efforts to avoid interpreting the results of this study in ways that manifest and support ahistorical and acultural understandings of gender and nationality. However, unlike qualitative assessments of individual texts, authors and contexts, quantitative analyses cannot illuminate unique or unusual manifestations of gender (or the complex relationships of such manifestations to other contested constructions, such as those of race, class, sexuality or nationality). Despite such limitations, this quantitative research offers a necessary corrective to the almost exclusive focus in Australian literary history on qualitative aspects of the literary field. This field contains both quantifiable and non-quantifiable elements, so understanding the history of Australian literature requires both qualitative and quantitative analyses. Accordingly, while the trends identified in this study will not relate to every Australian author, the capacity of a quantitative assessment to bring 'the larger cultural field into sharper focus' (Joshi 2002, 271) offers a framework for subsequent assessments of individual texts, authors and themes.

By viewing the field from a different perspective, this study is able to identify and demonstrate a number of previously unrecognised gender trends relating to the Australian novel. Particularly in the nineteenth century, a strong association emerges between the gendering of authorship and the novel in Britain, and gender trends in the Australian context. From 1855 to 1885 this association seems to have encouraged the publication of novels by Australian women, and such novels represent a far greater proportion of the publications during these three decades than has previously been acknowledged. While this study affirms the established view of the late 1880s and the 1890s as a male-dominated period in Australian literary history, the association that appears to exist between British gender trends and the Australian novel field challenges established readings of this gender trend. Specifically, whereas scholars in Australian literary studies routinely view the male dominance of authorship in the 1890s as a consequence of literary nationalism, I suggest that British gender trends were equally important in the gendering of Australian authorship at the end of the nineteenth century. My research indicates a divergence in gender trends in the British and Australian novel fields in the first two decades of the twentieth century, particularly evident in the prominence of critically successful Australian women writers. While reflecting their importance in Australian literary history, the critical success of these particular women writers is at least partly responsible for the lack of attention to the many women novelists who were also publishing in this period.

I collected the data for this study from the AustLit database, a non-profit, subscription-accessed electronic database designed to 'support and enhance research and learning in Australian literature' (AustLit 2008, 'Scope policy'). With coverage spanning from 1780 to the present, AustLit is produced through 'collaboration between twelve Australian Universities and the National Library of Australia' and provides 'authoritative information on hundreds of thousands of creative and critical Australian literature works relating to more than 100,000 Australian authors and literary organisations' (AustLit 2008, 'About'). Authors included in the AustLit database 'must be Australian, or must have a significant enough involvement in Australian literary activity to be identified as eligible'.²

I extracted these data in February 2008 by requesting records for all new novel titles published each year from 1780 to 1939, and then conducting individual searches using AustLit's 'gender' category to determine whether novelists were male or female. I removed from my dataset texts categorised by AustLit as 'Non-AustLit Novels'. Although such novels appear in AustLit this designation expressly excludes them from the category of Australian literature.³ Authors who employed pseudonyms were categorised in accordance with their 'gender' listing in the AustLit database. Accordingly, the results of this study do not differentiate female authors who used male pseudonyms from the general category of 'female' author, or male authors who used female pseudonyms from the general category of 'male' author. In some cases, such as when AustLit did not identify an author's gender, or when a novel was jointly authored by male and female writers, I categorised the novel title in the 'undetermined' gender group.

As with any dataset, these results are approximate. AustLit has probably not identified every novel title published between 1830 and 1939.⁴ Despite possible incompleteness or inaccuracies, the dataset is certainly large enough (including over 2,900 novel titles for the period from 1830 to 1939) and full enough to enable analysis of gender trends in the authorship of Australian novels. Given the likelihood that any imperfections in the data would relate to a relatively equal number of novel titles by men and women, it is probable that gender proportions would remain relatively constant regardless of minor changes in the dataset.

Figure 1 depicts the number of novel titles by Australian men and women published from 1830 to 1939. Figure 2 displays the same results in five-year moving averages (a format that evens out any exceptional peaks or plunges to display overall gender trends more clearly). These figures show that the majority of novel titles published between 1830 and 1850 were written by men. Whereas male novelists began publishing sporadically in the 1830s, and achieved a more sustained presence in the 1840s, regular publication of novel titles by Australian women did not begin until the 1850s, and was not consolidated until the late 1850s and 1860s.

Figure 1: Australian Men and Women Novelists, 1830 to 1939

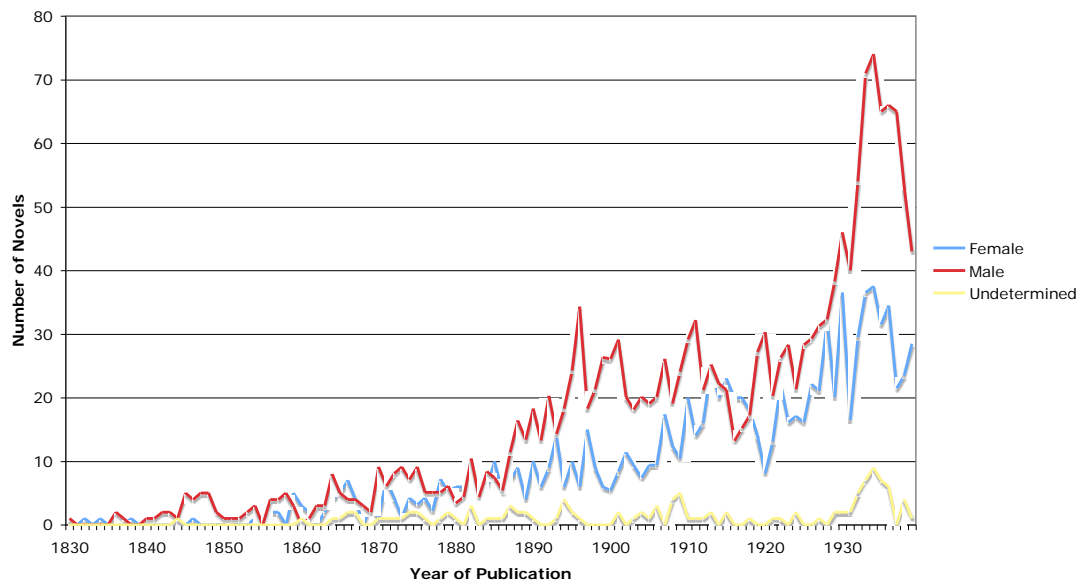
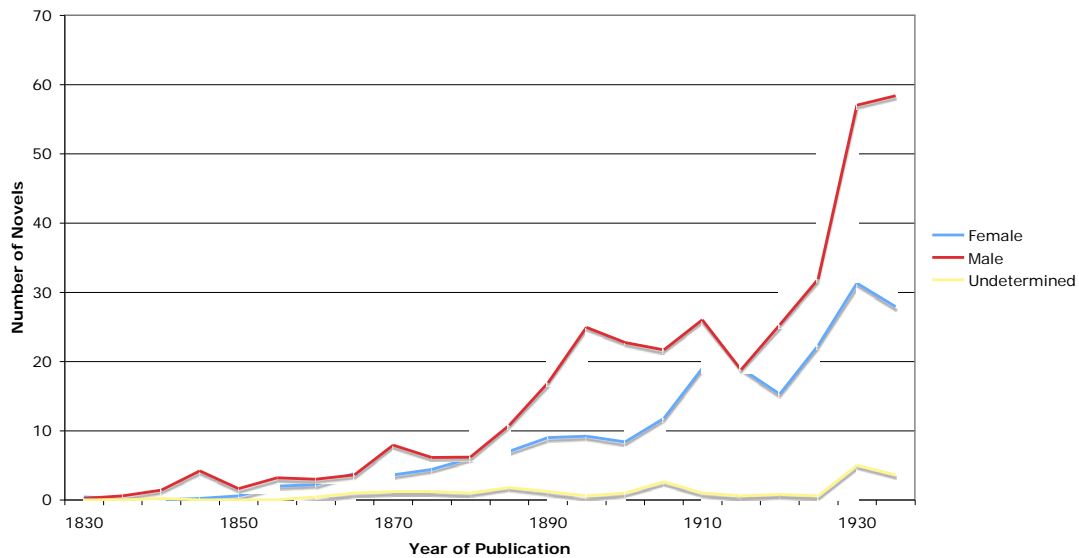


Figure 2: Australian Men and Women Novelists, 1830 to 1939
(five year moving averages)



From 1855 to 1885 – in the three decades following the beginning of regular publication of novels by Australian women – novel titles by men constituted 52.1 per cent of all titles published and novels titles by women, 39.7 per cent. Not until the last three decades (since the 1980s) did novel titles by women constitute such a significant proportion of publications for such an extended period. Moreover, although Australian women published an average of 39.7 per cent of novel titles over this period, in a number of individual years between 1855 and 1885 Australian women published more novel titles than men: namely in 1855, 1859, 1860, 1861, 1866, 1869, 1871, 1878, 1880, 1881, 1883 and 1885. This occurrence has been repeated at other times in Australian literary history. During the First World War (from 1916 to 1918), and particularly since the start of the 1990s,⁵ women have published more novel titles than have men. Yet at no other time in Australian literary history have the yearly number and proportion of novel titles by women so frequently surpassed the number and proportion of novel titles by men as they did from 1855 to 1885.

As one might expect, the overall rise in the number of Australian novel titles published in the nineteenth century coincides with the growth of the colony's population.⁶ But population growth does not explain why novel titles were so scarce until the 1840s. One might also ask why, when Australian novels began to be published regularly in the 1840s, were they written predominantly by men? And when Australian women began publishing novels in the 1850s, why did they immediately comprise such a significant proportion of the field? Furthermore, why did this proportion diminish in the late 1880s and 1890s? For a number of reasons it is logical to turn to Britain, and gender trends in authorship in that country, to suggest some answers to these questions. Not only were the vast majority of literate Australians of British origin – and keenly interested in the fashions and trends of the 'mother country' – but the majority of Australian novels of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were published in Britain and directed towards a British as well as an Australian readership (Nile 2002, 27).

Tuchman's (1989) empirical study of the relationship between gender and publishing in Victorian Britain provides a useful starting point for considering how gender trends in the Australian novel field relate to those in Britain. Drawing on the archives of the London publisher Macmillan from 1840 to 1917, Tuchman analyses the number and proportion of men and women who submitted novel manuscripts, compared to those whose manuscripts were accepted and published. Tuchman also considers prevalent gender constructions in official reports by readers hired by Macmillan to assess these manuscripts. There are two important differences between the data I have used and Tuchman's dataset. Firstly, Macmillan is a literary publisher, concerned with publishing what Tuchman terms the 'high culture novel' rather than genres such as detective or romance fiction. Thus, Tuchman's results refer to gender trends associated with the development of the novel as an art form in Victorian Britain. In contrast, the AustLit database includes Australian novels regardless of genre. Analysis of these records therefore relates to gender trends in the novel field as a whole.⁷ Secondly, the AustLit database contains little information about unpublished novels, so I cannot comment, as Tuchman does, on the relative success of men and women in achieving publication. Despite these differences, Tuchman's results are useful for reflecting on gender trends in the publication of Australian novels. This is not only because most Australian novels in this period were published in Britain (and thus were subjected to the gendered constructions of authorship and fiction circulating in the British novel field), but because discussion of the 'high culture novel' necessarily relates to its 'low culture' opposite.⁸

Based on the results of her analysis of the Macmillan archives, Tuchman describes the Victorian novel field in terms of three gender epochs. The first of these, from 1840 to 1879, she characterises in terms of male invasion. While most British novelists at this time were women, men moved into the field as the novel began to be valued as a cultural form. During this period, 'women submitted appreciably more novels to Macmillan than men did, and women's fiction was more likely to be accepted than men's' (1989, 7 – 8). The second epoch, from 1880 to 1889, Tuchman describes as a period of redefinition, during which

... men of letters, including critics, actively redefined the nature of a good novel and a great author ... men submitted more manuscripts to Macmillan than women did, but women and men were equally likely to have their fiction accepted. (1989, 8)

Tuchman identifies the final gender epoch, from 1890 to 1917, as one of 'institutionalisation ... when men's hold over the novel, particularly the high-culture novel, coalesced'. During this period, 'men submitted less fiction than women but enjoyed a higher rate of acceptance' (1989, 8).

The close relationship between Britain and Australia in the nineteenth century – particularly given that the majority of Australian novels were published in Britain at this time – leads one to expect a correlation in gender trends in the publication of Australian and British novels. This expectation is encouraged by the correlation between the beginning of the regular publication of novels by Australian men in the 1840s and Tuchman's findings regarding the emergence (around 1840) of novel writing as a potential source of financial and cultural reward for British men. But most novelists in Britain at this time were women, whereas almost no Australian women were publishing novels. This discrepancy in the gender trends in authorship in these two countries can be explained by the male domination of the early Australian

population. In other words, the almost complete absence of novel titles by Australian women before 1850 can be aligned with the small number of women in the colony.⁹ Accordingly, the beginning of the regular publication of Australian novels by women from the 1850, correlates with a period of marked growth in the proportion of women in the Australian population. Specifically, the 1850s (the decade when regular publication of Australian women's novels began) is the point at which the ratio of the Australian population changed from one woman to every two men, to two women to every three men.

As the proportion of women in the Australian population increased in the nineteenth century, so did their level of literacy.¹⁰ From 1832, the number of women voluntarily migrating to New South Wales outstripped the number of women convicts (Oxley and Richards 2001, 30). According to Oxley and Richards:

The most measurable difference between convicted and assisted women was their 'degree of instruction', or level of literacy. ... Free immigrant women were more educated than either convicts or the women they left behind. (2001, 33)

Ninety-three per cent of assisted English women immigrants to Australia could read or write, compared to 48 per cent of women in England able to sign their name on a marriage register (Oxley and Richards 2001, 33). The beginning of the regular publication of novels by Australian women therefore occurred in the context of growth in both the proportion of women in the Australian population, and the proportion of literate women.

Although Australian women were initially under-represented in novel publication, the fact that they regularly published more novel titles than men in the first three decades of their sustained presence in the Australian novel field – between 1855 and 1885 – can also be interpreted in relation to British gendered constructions of the novel and novel writing. According to Tuchman (1989), the British novel (particularly the high culture novel) was being redefined as masculine during this period, but men had not yet consolidated their hold on the field. Given Australia's close social, cultural and economic ties to Britain, the continuing presence of women in the British novel field during this period makes it probable that Australian women would not have violated dominant gender codes by writing and publishing novels. In other words, the fact that manuscripts by British women were more likely to be accepted from 1840 to 1879 must have facilitated publication of nineteenth-century Australian women's novels.

Beverley Kingston's identification of an especially close association between the content of nineteenth-century British and Australian women's fiction provides an additional reason for the high number of novels by Australian women between 1855 and 1885. According to Kingston, the social, romantic and domestic themes that dominated nineteenth-century Australian women's fiction, although

... far removed from the vigorous typically Australian literature of the nationalist canon ... were easily accessible to British and American readers. ... In contrast much masculine writing was deeply embedded in bush and outback life and idiom, and though very popular with its Australian readers, had limited appeal elsewhere. (1994, 91)

If, as Kingston asserts, the content of Australian women's fiction had a particular resonance with the powerful British market, this may have given Australian women writers an advantage over their more numerous male compatriots in attaining publication in Britain. Ultimately, quantitative analysis supports feminist claims that

Australian women writers were a significant presence in the nineteenth century. But particularly between 1855 and 1885, women writers constituted an even greater proportion of the Australian novel field than has been acknowledged hitherto. The quantitative results also support the idea that gender trends in Australian authorship in the nineteenth century were strongly influenced by British gender constructions.

Although the number of novel titles by Australian women increased slightly from 1880 to 1889, the number of novel titles by men grew significantly during that decade. Accordingly, the proportion of the Australian novel titles by women writers decreased from 48.6 per cent in the first half of the 1880s to 36.9 per cent in the second half of that decade. The declining proportion of Australian novel titles by women in the 1880s corresponds with Tuchman's (1989) description of this decade as a time when British men began to redefine the novel as a masculine form and were increasingly likely to submit manuscripts to Macmillan (8). Indeed, this British decade of 'redefinition' corresponds precisely with the period in the nineteenth century registering the most significant growth in both the number and proportion of novel titles by Australian men.

The continued growth, through the 1890s, in the proportion of Australian novel titles by men appears to reflect the subsequent process of 'institutionalisation' that Tuchman (1989) describes. Specifically, she notes that, from 1890 to 1917, men's hold over the (especially high culture) British novel coalesced. While women were more likely to submit manuscripts to Macmillan, men's manuscripts were more likely to be published (8). In Australia, the proportion of novel titles by Australian women declined from 33 per cent in the first half of the 1890s to 27.1 per cent in the second half of that decade. By the first half of the 1900s, novel titles by women constituted only 26.5 per cent of Australian novel titles (making this the five-year period with the lowest proportion of Australian novels by women in the period surveyed in the paper, excepting the years before the beginning of the sustained publication of Australian women's novels in 1855). Significantly, this decline in the proportion of novels titles by Australian women in the 1880s and 1890s occurred in the context of growth in the proportion of women in the Australian population. Thus, at the end of the nineteenth century, the proportion of Australian novel titles by women had an inverse relationship to the proportion of women in the Australian population.

It is unlikely that many people familiar with Australian literary history – and, in particular, with the gendering of that history in feminist literary studies over the past three decades – will be surprised by the relatively low proportion of novel titles by women published in the final decade of the nineteenth century. As well as an epoch in Australian literature (Whitlock 1993, 164), the 1890s are frequently identified as the period when Australian culture, including its literary tradition, was defined as masculine. Drawing on Marilyn Lake's influential 1986 analysis of the 1890s in terms of a conflict between masculinists and feminists over cultural authority, Sheridan (1995, 27) describes the way in which 'Australian literary nationalism' was defined in this period through 'the exclusion and denigration of cultural and political concerns designated feminine'. Both Lake (1986) and Sheridan (1995) identify the emergence of the *Bulletin* in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, and its association of Australian nationalism with realist literary fiction, as central to the

...explicitly and insistently masculine – indeed masculinist – tenor of th[e] cultural nationalism which became the dominant discourse constructing

‘Australianness’ during the 1890s and which has survived in some quarters ever since. (Sheridan 1995, 34)¹¹

As Sheridan notes, this association of Australian nationalism and realist literary fiction produced a negative alignment of popular fiction with femininity, conventionality, English audiences and imperialism. This denigration of popular fiction was not restricted to novels by women. The slight, though surprising, reduction in the number (though not in the proportion) of novel titles by Australian men from 1895 to 1905 is arguably related to the marginalisation and feminisation of ‘nineteenth century masculine romances’ (Sheridan 1995, 31) as well as their ‘feminine’ counterparts.¹² Nevertheless, Sheridan and others have argued convincingly that the association of nineteenth-century women’s writing, in particular, with femininity, conventionality and English audiences produced a ‘pejorative characterisation’ (Sheridan 1995, 27) of such writing in the 1890s. Returning to Kingston’s point about similarities in the content of nineteenth-century British and Australian women’s novels, it is possible that the perceived or actual ‘Englishness’ of Australian women’s writing (a characteristic that potentially enhanced the likelihood of their being published in the middle decades of the nineteenth century) weighed against Australian women novelists at the end of that century. Instead, the growing influence of Australian literary nationalism led to the publication and celebration of masculinist and nationalist themes more common in men’s novels (Kingston 1994, 91).

Variations of this argument are frequently posed, and the reduction in the proportion of novel titles by Australian women in the 1880s and 1890s seems to support feminist claims about the masculinisation of the Australian cultural and literary tradition at this time. But this argument tends to underemphasise the influence of British and international constructions of authorship and the novel on Australian novel publication. Claims of anti-imperialism are embedded in the paradigm of Australian literary nationalism. This should not blind us to the fact that the majority of Australian novels were still published in Britain. Hence, the marginalisation of Australian women’s fiction in the 1890s, together with the celebration of an increasingly masculine and male-dominated literary norm, cannot be attributed solely to Australian literary and cultural discourses. The developing cultural authority and masculinisation of the novel in Britain must also have played a significant role. In other words, the Australian novel felt the impact of modernism as a literary movement that aligned the novel with realism, masculinity and art. At a national level, this was manifested via the paradigm of Australian literary nationalism. At an international level, modernist discourses in British literature and culture influenced the Australian novel (not least due to the continuing pre-eminence of British publishers of such novels).

This triad of masculinised forces – Australian literary nationalism, British constructions of authorship, and modernist constructions of the novel – tends to obscure the fact that the declining proportion of novel titles by Australian women in the 1880s and 1890s occurred in the context of growth in factors usually associated with women’s emancipation. The growth in the proportion of women in the Australian population during this period was accompanied by growth in the proportion of literate women, a common indicator of education and emancipation. The disjunction between growth in women’s literacy and a reduction in novel titles by women suggests that levels of literacy were in tension with cultural ideas of gender in

determining whether an individual would write a novel, or whether that novel would be published. The 1880s and 1890s in Australia were also a time when feminist discourses were particularly prominent, not least in debates about women's suffrage. The declining proportion of novel titles by women during this period contradicts the association, implicit in much feminist literary criticism, between women's emancipation and their increased ability to use fiction as a tool of social and economic agency.

In fact, Tuchman suggests a link between British women's emancipation and the decrease in women novelists at the start of the twentieth century (1989, 63). As well as being forced out of the field, she hypothesises that middle-class British women may have abandoned novel writing partly of their own volition. As opportunities for paid and voluntary work outside the home became available in the 1900s, middle-class women were not longer compelled to write when seeking paid employment. In Australia, middle-class women had opportunities to work outside the home since at least the 1870s. 'By the 1880s' – when the proportion of women's novels began to decline – 'women staffed post offices and telegraph offices throughout Australia' (Nugent 2002, 31). Thus, as well as being forced out of the field by the growing masculinisation of national and international constructions of the novel, it is possible that Australian women, like (but perhaps earlier than) their British counterparts, chose to vacate this profession.

While gender trends in the Australian novel field in the nineteenth century parallel those Tuchman describes in Britain, the relatively high proportion of novel titles by Australian women in the first two decades of the twentieth century conflicts with Tuchman's description of the gendering of authorship and the novel in Britain. Tuchman identifies 1900 to 1917 as the period when British men's hold over the novel strengthened. Yet, in Australia, the proportion of novel titles by women increased markedly from 26.5 per cent in the first half of the 1900s to 32.4 per cent in the second half of that decade, to 41.3 per cent in the first half of the 1910s, to 50.1 per cent in the second half of that decade (making 1915 – 1919 the five-year span with the highest proportion of Australian novel titles by women in the period studied in this paper). Part of this growth in the proportion of Australian novels by women, particularly from 1914, must be attributed to the First World War.¹³ On average, novel titles by women represented 37.6 per cent of the field between 1900 and 1919 (or 31.4 per cent if results for the years during the First World War are excluded). While the overall proportion of novel titles by Australian women in these two decades did not reach the proportion of the field constituted by women's publishing from 1855 to 1885 (39.7 per cent), such growth stands in contrast to Tuchman's description of the early twentieth century in terms of the consolidation of male domination of the British novel.

As noted above, Tuchman explores the records of a literary publisher while the data I extracted from AustLit include all Australian novel titles. With the introduction of mass-market paperbacks at the start of the twentieth century (Nile and Walker 2001), this variation in the scope of the two datasets represents a possible reason why Australian women were publishing more novel titles at the start of the twentieth century while British women were leaving the high culture novel field. Yet when contemporaries discussed early twentieth-century Australian women writers, the focus was not on authors of popular fiction but on writers such as Henry Handel

Richardson, Miles Franklin, M. Barnard Eldershaw, Katharine Susannah Prichard and Jean Devanny. As Sheridan asserts, these women

... saw themselves as serious writers with a social responsibility to national cultural development and the defence of freedom of expression. They regarded their writing as an art that required constant attention and reshaping to fit the new requirements that social change made of it. European literary modernist techniques were adapted to the requirements of social realism – and the romantic and comic traditions of popular entertainment were mostly by-passed in the process. (1995, 155)

A range of evidence has been cited to support the assertion that Australian women novelists were prominent cultural figures in the early twentieth century. The 1928 Bulletin prize for best novel manuscript was shared between Katharine Susannah Prichard and M. Barnard Eldershaw.¹⁴ Dorothy Hayball's 1931 essay focused on 'The Feminine Monopoly of Literary Prizes' (see Dever 1994, 133). In 1938, M. Barnard Eldershaw's *Essays in Australian Fiction* discussed equal numbers of male and female authors. Additionally, there was a strong presence of women in the literary community of the time, as reviewers, editors, judges of literary prizes, and officials of literary societies (see Sheridan 1995, 154; Dever 1994, 133). At the start of the twentieth century, the increase in the proportion of Australian novel titles by women may have been due partly to women writing popular fiction. Yet the critical attention 'serious' women writers received from their contemporaries indicates the influential role played by early twentieth-century Australian women novelists in constructing a national literature. It also points to the apparent distinction between gendered constructions of authorship and the novel in Britain and Australia at this time.

The prominence and prevalence of early twentieth-century Australian women novelists has not gone unnoticed by feminist literary critics. Indeed, in feminist analyses of Australian literature, the prominence of women writers in the first three or four decades of the twentieth century is a dominant theme. In their introduction to the anthology *Eclipsed: Two Centuries of Australian Women's Fiction*, Connie Burns and Marygai McNamara assert that: 'In the first half of the twentieth century women wrote almost half of the published novels and it is generally acknowledged that most of the best novelists of that period were women' (1988, ix). Discussing the decades between 1900 and 1930, both Gillian Whitlock (1993) and Kay Ferres (1993, 15) comment on the prevalence of women writers. For Drusilla Modjeska, the 1930s, in particular, were 'remarkable years in Australian cultural history. Women were producing the best fiction of the period and they were, for the first and indeed only time, a dominant influence in Australian literature' (1991, 1). Maryanne Dever depicts the entire inter-war period as a time of 'an almost unprecedented concentration of women writers making contributions to the development of a new national literary culture' (1994, 141). Likewise, Goldsworthy asserts that 1929

... ushered in a period of extraordinary productivity and creativity in Australian fiction, especially fiction by women. Throughout the 1930s and even through World War Two ... a generation of women writers ... continued to produce fiction reflective of their times. (2000, 118)

Although feminist assessments of Australian literature in the first part of the twentieth century discuss women writers as a group, the implicit focus of such statements – as well as the explicit focus of the majority of studies of individual texts and authors – is

on the same group of 'serious' women writers that garnered attention among early twentieth-century commentators. At least part of the reason for this focus relates to the institutional and disciplinary context in which feminist literary critics worked to incorporate women writers into the traditional canon of Australian literary history. The fact that these novelists wrote 'serious' or high culture novels allowed feminist literary critics to justify attention to these authors within the parameters of traditional, aesthetically oriented approaches to literary history. The engagement of these women novelists in the masculine (and masculinist) discourse of Australian literary nationalism enabled feminist literary critics to challenge essentialist understandings of literature – that is, the notion that men write serious, masculine novels and women write frivolous, feminine fiction – while exploring established debates in and narratives of Australian literary history. Finally, the way in which these women writers 'took on the literary nationalism that emerged among male writers in the 1890s and made it over to [their] own requirements' (Sheridan 1995, 154) perhaps offered feminist literary critics a reflection of what they were trying to do with the discipline of literary studies.

Ultimately, however, while feminist literary criticism has produced renewed awareness of the importance of these particular women writers in Australian literary history, in the process of so doing an alternative canon has been created, one with its own exclusions and omissions. To a significant degree, all canons – whether alternative or traditional – are self-perpetuating. The critical debate (in the case of feminist literary criticism, relating to gender) that amasses around the canon comes to organise perceptions of the period, as well as the terms by which such fiction is accessed and valued (Thompson 1999). Accordingly, while certain feminist critics have explored other types of fiction published in the early twentieth century (particularly romance novels by women), the pre-eminence of this group of 'serious' women writers has contributed to – at the same time as it has concealed – the relative neglect of other novelists who published between 1900 and 1940. This is true for women writers who received little or no critical attention at the time they were publishing.¹⁵ Yet this is also the case for a number of women writers who were as (and in some cases more) critically successful at the start of the twentieth century as the above canon. This latter category includes authors such as Barbara Baynton, Winifred Birkett, Dorothy Cottrell, Elinor Mordaunt, Mary Gaunt, Marion Miller Knowles, Myra Morris and Helen Simpson.¹⁶ Moreover, the focus on women's writing generally has meant that feminist literary critics have neglected fiction by men. As a result, women writers in general – and this group of 'serious' women writers in particular – have become the locus for discussion of gender and fiction in the early twentieth century. On the whole, Australian fiction published before 1890 has received less attention than fiction published after this time. Although feminist critics have arguably devoted more time to the nineteenth century than other commentators on Australian literary history, the particular focus of feminist literary criticism on early twentieth-century women writers has contributed to an under-appreciation of the extent of the presence of nineteenth-century women writers.

The focus of feminist literary critics on these 'serious' women writers, and on their critical success in the early twentieth century, also tends to obscure the fact that, from 1920, the proportion of Australian novel titles by women began to decline. While particularly apparent in Burns and McNamara's claims regarding Australian women novelists in 'the first half of the twentieth century' (1988, ix), a conflation of critical

success with statistical prevalence seems to inform various assertions by feminist literary critics. Women writers have been described as singularly ‘dominant’ (Modjeska 1991, 1), ‘concentrat[ed]’ (Dever 1994, 141), or ‘productiv[e]’ (Goldsworthy 2000, 118) in the inter-war period. In fact, following a period of growth in the 1900s and 1910s, the proportion of Australian novel titles by women declined over the next two decades. From 50.1 per cent between 1915 and 1919, the proportion of Australian novel titles by women fell to 36.5 per cent in the first half of the 1920s before increasing again to 40.4 per cent in the second half of that decade. In the first half of the 1930s, the proportion of novel titles by women declined to 33.5 per cent, and then to 31.2 per cent in the second half of that decade. Although not constant, this decline in the proportion of novel titles by Australian women through the 1920s and 1930s indicates the beginning of a trend that produced a particularly male-dominated period in the history of the Australian novel. Indeed, the proportion of Australian novel titles by women did not rise above 30 per cent again until the 1980s.

On the one hand, overall gender trends indicate that, from 1920, the Australian, like the British, novel field was increasingly male dominated. Concurrently, the continuing presence of a significant number of critically successful (‘serious’) Australian women novelists in the 1920s and 1930s – and even the 1940s – indicates anecdotally at least that Australian women’s authorship of ‘high culture’ novels functioned in contrast to gender trends in the rest of the field. This is the opposite of what one might expect. Given the masculinisation of the modernist literary novel generally, as well as Sheridan’s demonstration of the derogatory literary nationalist association of Australian women’s writing with femininity and conventionality, the popular realm would seem the permissible site, if any, for women writers.

The fact that critically successful Australian women novelists employed discourses of literary nationalism affirms that the masculinisation of the literary field can and did occur simultaneously with the success of certain women writers. Yet if women writers were able to engage in (and some would say dominate) this masculine realm, why did the proportion of novel titles by women (including high culture novels) diminish through the 1930s and 1940s? The growing prominence of the novel in Australian literary culture and for literary nationalist discourses begins to account for this trend. Whereas Tuchman’s description of the increasing male dominance of the British novel is based on the emerging centrality of the novel to modernist literary discourse in the nineteenth century, it seems that the novel became dominant in Australia somewhat later. David Carter argues that the novel became the pre-eminent literary form in Australia only by 1930 (2000, 267), while Modjeska identifies this situation somewhat later, in 1938 (1991, 4). Perhaps it is the importance to Australian literary nationalism of poetry and short stories – forms promoted by the *Bulletin* – that meant women were less quickly excluded or ‘edged out’ of the novel field. Alternatively, or perhaps concurrently, the introduction of import tariffs in 1930 made novels published in Britain more expensive, and fostered the local industry. In both scenarios, the differing economic and social status of novel writing in Australia and Britain perhaps led to the differences in gender trends in authorship of the novel in the twentieth century.

Like the 1890s, the 1930s are characterised as an epoch in Australian literature (Whitlock 1993, 164). Whatever the reason for the declining proportion of novel titles written by women in the 1930s, it is apparent that both decades were male dominated.

The fact that the 1890s and 1930s have received a great deal of attention in Australian literary studies (whereas the decades in between have been relatively overlooked) lends credence to feminist claims that women's contributions to the field have been obscured by a masculinist critical focus on male fiction. However, the extent to which these decades were male dominated indicates that the critical focus on men's novels reflects the field during these decades. Certainly, the 1930s signalled the end of a century-long period during which a remarkable, and only recently matched, proportion of Australian novel titles were by women.

A quantitative assessment of gender trends in the authorship of Australian novels indicates strong associations between the Australian and British literary fields in the nineteenth century. In Australian literary studies we are accustomed to viewing the male dominance of the 1890s as a consequence of literary nationalism. This study suggests that British gender trends might have been equally influential in constructing Australian authorship at this time. In the twentieth century, however, gender trends in the authorship of Australian novels seem to have diverged temporarily from those that Tuchman describes in Britain, in that Australian women writers were prominent authors of the high culture novel. The prominence of critically successful women novelists at the start of the twentieth century demonstrates the important role that women have played in defining Australian literature. Concurrently, the focus of feminist literary critics on these authors is at least partly responsible for the lack of attention to the many women novelists who were contemporaneous with this canon, as well as the under-representation of nineteenth-century women novelists in critical discussion, despite their astonishing numerical and cultural significance. The focus on this group of critically successful women writers also seems to have obscured the increasing male domination of the Australian novel field from 1920. The capacity of quantitative studies to identify and explore such trends in the literary field indicates the importance of such analyses to Australian literary studies, and literary studies generally. As Priya Joshi writes:

... quantitative methods expand literary history and make all sorts of discoveries possible, much the way that early maps did in the dissemination of knowledge about 'new' worlds. Statistics, like maps, are indeed lies to some extent ... but they are lies that tell a truth that would not otherwise be evident. (2002, 264)

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¹ The AustLit database lists only one novel title published before 1830, Therese Huber's *Abentheuer auf einer reise nach New-Holland*, published in 1801. Although Huber's novel depicts Australia, she never visited the country.

² This category also includes 'expatriate authors ... who maintain a link to Australia' and '[s]ignificant short-term residents of Australia who have identified sufficiently with the country and its people to have written from an "Australian" viewpoint' (AustLit 2008, 'Scope policy').

³ Some non-AustLit novel titles are included because they are well-known canonical texts (as is the case with novels by George Eliot or Charles Dickens). Others are included for more obscure reasons. For instance, Rufus Dawes's *Nix's Mate* (1839) is included in AustLit database results for Australian novels because an article was published about this book in *Australian Literary Studies* in 1988.

⁴ The AustLit database notes that '[p]opular literature – such as romances and westerns – is represented rather than fully described' (AustLit 2008, 'Scope').

⁵ Since 1992, except for in 1997 and 2000, the proportion of novel titles by Australian women has exceeded that of men.

⁶ From 1800 to 1860 Australia's non-Indigenous population more than doubled in size each decade. From 1870 to 1890 it grew between 35 per cent and 45 per cent each decade. Between 1890 and 1900 it increased by around 20 per cent (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008).

⁷ The AustLit database does provide information about the genre of published novels. While such information might have been a useful avenue for differentiating gender trends relating to the high culture Australian novel from those relating to the field as a whole, for novels published before the 1940s, I found that genre classifications listed in AustLit differed significantly from the classifications employed by scholars who have analysed genre fiction at that time. For instance, Susan Sheridan analyses romance novels by women published in the early twentieth century (27 – 35), but these novels are not listed in the AustLit database as romance. For this reason, I have elected not to include this aspect of the AustLit database results in this present study.

⁸ In Ken Gelder's 2004 book on popular fiction, he contends that 'Literature' – his term for the high culture novel – lacks definitive generic features, and instead, most clearly defines itself in opposition to 'popular fiction', or the low culture novel.

⁹ The proportion of the Australian population represented by women, at the start of each decade in the nineteenth century, was as follows: 1800 (28 per cent), 1810 (34 per cent), 1820 (29 per cent), 1830 (24 per cent), 1840 (33 per cent), 1850 (41 per cent), 1860 (42 per cent), 1870 (45 per cent), 1880 (46 per cent), 1890 (46 per cent) and 1900 (47 per cent) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008).

¹⁰ It would seem logical to refer at this point to the introduction and spread of mass schooling in Australia in the 1870s and 1880s. A correlation between mass schooling and increased literary production is problematised, however, by the reported failure of this system in terms of access, attendance and the provision of secondary schooling (see Austin 1961, 166, 177 – 79, 233). The potential impact of compulsory primary education on novel writing in Australia was diluted also by the fact that levels of literacy among adults were actually higher in Australia than in Britain well before the introduction of mass schooling. As Nicholas and Shergold note: 'In England in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, only 65% [of people] could sign their names on the marriage register; in contrast, 75% of English convicts transported to New

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South Wales could read or write' (2001, 21).

¹¹ 11. See also Martin (1993), 56).

¹² Of course, 'feminine romances' were often, though not always, written by women, just as 'masculine romances' were frequently, though not exclusively, written by men.

¹³ As I noted above, women published more novel titles than men from 1916 to 1918 inclusive.

¹⁴ As Kerry Goldsworthy notes: 'A prize intended to honour one winner had in fact been shared among three, and all of them were women' (2000, 115).

¹⁵ This section of the field is so large that it would be impractical to list all their names (hence the adoption of a quantitative methodology in this account of gender in Australian literary history). Nevertheless, the obscurity of these forgotten authors aptly demonstrates the distortion that occurs when a focus on the canon becomes the predominant means of exploring the literary field. The following is a list of only those women novelists publishing between 1900 and 1903 who have been entirely forgotten by literary history: Bertha Batley, Esther Hacknay, Lillias Hamilton, Anne Wilson Glenny, K.E. Andrews, Mary Moore Bentley, Elizabeth Kirkham, Bassett Mary E. Stone, Ellersley Beresford, Eleanor Hoyt, H. Arnold Nelson, Hannah Newton Baker, Blanche L. Tottenham, Jessie Mabel Waterhouse and Joyce Vincent.

¹⁶ That said, since the 1980s, feminist literary critics have also rescued from obscurity many women novelists who would previously have belonged in this category of forgotten women writers; for example: Zora Cross, Dulcie Deamer, Mary Gaunt and Louise Mack.