

---

## UNIT 5 MODERN READINGS: SOME IMPORTANT AREAS

---

### Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Modern and Postmodern Readings
  - 5.2.1 Characteristics of an Epic
  - 5.2.2 Epic Components
  - 5.2.3 Text and Meaning
- 5.3 Inner Movements
  - 5.3.1 Idea of Time
  - 5.3.2 Dream and Visions
  - 5.3.3 Biography and Fiction: Some Comments
- 5.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.5 Glossary
- 5.6 Questions
- 5.7 Suggested Reading

---

### 5.0 OBJECTIVES

---

In the earlier Units, we have covered most of the important components with reference to Patrick White's *Voss*. In this Unit, we would like to introduce to you some modernist and postmodernist methods to arrive at a larger understanding of this novel. As we belong to the postmodernist era, it is necessary for us to judge this novel from a postmodernist critical point of view. You are already familiar with terms like 'modernism', 'postmodernism', 'deconstruction' etc., having studied these critical theories in your Literary Theory and Criticism course (MEG 05). In this unit, we shall firstly, define 'modernism' and 'postmodernism' and then analyse the text using one of these critical approaches. Let us begin with the introduction.

---

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

---

One of the essential methods of postmodern critical analysis is to deconstruct the codified levels of meaning. In this unit, we shall therefore consider some of the ways and means by which to examine the novel from many different angles. With the arrival of Derrida and Paul de Man on the philosophical as well as literary scene, many revolutionary changes in the methodology of literary analysis took place. This led to the subversion of the fixed code of meanings and encouraged a multiplicity of interpretation. This widening vista of interpretation will be evident in the following analysis. Let us look at the terms 'modernism' and 'postmodernism' before we go any further.

---

### 5.2 MODERN AND POSTMODERN READINGS

---

Before we begin one important question should be clear to us: what is modern and what is postmodern? Modernism is a refusal to accept the traditional patterns of thought. This element of critical denial of traditionality and the opting for experimentation comes to be strengthened especially after the two World Wars. This

naturally gave way to multiple forms of experiments in the fields of literature, philosophy and science. But in the 70s, we once again confront a critical shift in both the literary and philosophical circles. The critical thinkers are no longer content with modernist explorations. Postmodern critics attempt to subvert the rigid canons and formulate open-ended discussions on literature, philosophy, politics, sociology and so on. These critical approaches may also be applied to Patrick White's *Voss*. We may for instance, deconstruct *Voss* by analysing the novel in the manner given below. Many critics have called *Voss* a book of epic stature. Let us look at *Voss* from this point of view and discern whether or not it is fit to be called an Epic.

### 5.2.1 Characteristics of an Epic.

Before we begin with the epic components of *Voss*, we shall try to formulate the distinguishing features of an epic. M H Abrams (in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*) has given us a relatively good idea of what an epic is. In the first place, an epic presents a great hero and his heroic deeds. Thus Achilles in Homer's *Iliad* is the mainstay of the Greek camp in the great battle against the Trojans. Thus Odysseus in the *Odyssey*, Beowulf in *Beowulf* or Rama in the *Ramayan* are some of the splendid prototypes of heroic figures. Secondly, the setting of an epic should be vast. Abrams in this context gives some examples: "Odysseus wanders over the Mediterranean basin", again Virgil's hero Aeneas (Aeneid) descends into the underworld. Milton's *Paradise Lost* covers a wide range of Heaven, Earth and Hell. Thirdly, the epic poet presents the superhuman deeds of the hero. Thus in Homer's *Iliad*, we come across the great deeds of Achilles in the Trojan War. In the *Odyssey* we come across the adventurous wanderings of Odysseus. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton describes the rebel angels against God and Satan's final attempt to corrupt mankind. Fourthly, an epic always concentrates on supernatural beings for instance we, find the Olympian Gods in Homer's epic, God, Christ and the angels in *Paradise Lost*. In this way, the epic poet makes use of the divine machinery (*deus ex machina*), meaning thereby that gods come down to take part in human action. Finally, the epic poet makes use of a grand writing style. In other words, elevated or high style is used to bring grandeur to the subject of the epic. Having said this, let us try and compare Patrick White's *Voss* with Homer's *Iliad*.

### 5.2.2 Epic Components

*Voss* is supposed to be based on the true record of Ludwig Leichhardt who died in the Australian desert in 1848. In this novel, White has presented a mysterious German figure who, attempts to overreach the untoward circumstances of life by trying to cross the Australian continent for the first time. It has been sometimes interpreted as a novel with a significant epical dimension. In fact, traditional epic properties put forward in the context of a modern design may be found in many different forms of creative activity. It is possible to locate certain proximate patterns of parallelism between the traditional epics of Homer and Patrick White's *Voss*. It may be pertinent, therefore, to chart out the points of parallelism:

#### *Iliad*

#### *Voss*

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 1. Assembly of the Achaean Soldiers          | 1. Voss's collection of certain adventures.                |
| 2. Vastness of the epic battle               | 2. Vastness of the journey                                 |
| 3. Difference between Achilles and Agamemnon | 3. Difference between Voss and Turner.                     |
| 4. Achilles' withdrawal with the Myrmidons   | 4. Withdrawal of Turner and others with Judd as the leader |

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 5. Laocoon and the snake signifying a decisive finality | 5. The great snake and Voss                     |
| 6. Final pessimism in death and destruction.            | 6. Finality reached through a series of deaths. |

### 5.2.3 Text and Meaning

Based on these six points of parallelism, we may analyse *Voss* as a modern day epic and discern the probability or lack in it. Let us look at textuality in the next section. The idea of meaning is almost coterminous with knowledge. For the science of meaning itself signifies a system of knowledge. The modern quest for knowledge begins to take shape in a different direction with **Edmund Husserl's** phenomenological philosophy that considers the world as a reflection of consciousness; and speech has an expression of absolute meanings that exist separately from language. **Husserl's phenomenology** holds further that pure meaning exists first as a pre-verbal transcendental signified and then finds expression through the human voice.

But this critical position is challenged by **Jacques Derrida's** notion of **deconstruction** that stands firmly against Husserl's critical principle in so far as Derrida questions the latter's belief in the pre-linguistic absolute meaning. Derrida finds a difference or division within the sign between its two aspects. In other words, he discovers an infinite range of variables in the interrelation of the signifier and the signified. He believes that the signifier could suggest a large number of possible signifieds. Thus Derrida's post-structuralist notion of deconstruction finds fault with the absolute notion that confines meaning to a limited boundary. Derrida visualises an open-ended, infinite possibility of meaning that opens up an appropriate perspective of modern explication

Patrick White's *Voss* may conform to a deconstructive pattern through a large number of explications intended in the text. He has, therefore, marked a sharp break from the traditional story arrangement and contrasted a terrible expedition with the normative design of life. Again frequent intrusion of visions and telepathic correlation presents a collapse of traditional realism. If we prepare a gist of the story pattern, it will appear surprisingly slight. We come across Voss, the German explorer, at the house of Mr. Bonner who is there with the explicit purpose of crossing the Australian continent. Here he collects fellow-adventurers, develops a mutual feeling of love with Laura and makes for the disastrous journey. Then follows an alternate pattern of Voss's progress and the reactions in the house of Mr. Bonner, with a distinct emphasis on Laura's lovelorn waiting. It ends with the creation of a chasm within the party and the consequent death of Voss and the others in the desert. Things are rounded off with the discovery of the mysterious conditions of Voss's death and Laura's prospective hopefulness. Voss has been presented as a figure that stands opposed to steadfast, fixed meanings. He in fact considers the deconstructive method of destroying limitations of meaning. When Mr. Bonner seems doubtful of the results of the expedition and asks: "You are aware, I should say, what it could mean?" Voss replies: "If we could compare meanings, we would arrive perhaps at different conclusions". Even the figure of Voss himself is deconstructed by means of the interactions of the other characters. When he refuses to dine with the Bonners, different perspectives of the man come to the surface:

"A rude man", saw Mr. Bonner. "A foreigner", saw the P.s. and "someone to whom I am completely indifferent," saw Laura Trevelyan.

Even in matters of primary discussions on the mapping of the journey, there is an emphasis on open-ended indeterminacy. When Voss's team-mates try to present a slapdash dependence on a fixed purpose, Le Mesurier ironically says: "Purpose? So far, no purpose." But Voss perfectly realises the nature of variability. He therefore

says: "I would be purposeless in this same sea". Again Le Mesurier asks about the time to be covered by this expedition. But Voss rejects any formulaic codification: "One month. Two months. It is not yet decided". The moment of their journey in a ship has also been conceived in terms of multiple reactions from the standpoint of involved spectators. Voss and the party set sail in a ship called *Osprey* that has become almost a symbol of a microcosmic world proceeding towards a strange, infinite, macrocosm. The entire picture, once again comes to be deconstructed through the varying attitudes of three women. For Laura, it is an escape out into a broad prospective world: "Yes, they have got away". Rose Portion feels inclined to pray for the explorers: "Oh, I will pray for them". Belle suddenly waxes eloquent on Palfreyman's nicety, quietude and kindness. But such scattered, disjointed opinions are merged into a deep sense of melancholia. Thus the essential impact finally yields a larger dimension of inexplicable sadness: "Their bodies shivered in their thin gowns: their minds were exposed to the keenest barbs of thought; and the whole scene that their vision embraced became distinct and dancing beautiful but sad".

The cave experience of the explorers (Chapter 10) points to the range of flexible variables present in the novel. The cave with its rock drawings not only indicates a sense of shelter but a sense of mysterious interior that creates a design out of an apparent formlessness. But the experiential mode of all this has been deconstructed by the interpretive variety of the reactions: "The simplicity and truthfulness of the symbol was at times terribly apparent, to the extent that each man interpreted them according to his own needs and level". But the deconstructive variants finally lead up to a foreshadowing of Voss's death at the end. The picture in the cave, therefore, seems to point at a linear, teleological movement: "See, this man is going to die. They have gone in at the back through the shoulder-blades".

---

## 5.3 INNER MOVEMENTS

---

Yet another way of deconstructing the novel would be by analysing the two unities of time and place/space. Let us see how time and place/space are measured in the novel.

### 5.3.1 Idea of Time

The idea of time and space relationship is a significant contributing factor to the complexity of the novel. In *Voss* we are often led to look backward and forward—backward to the past and forward to the future. This movement of time naturally coalesces with the progress in space. It can be said to approximate a linear design that implicates the idea of the present through a demonstration of the past and the future. Consider, for instance, the first meeting of Voss and Laura. After initial formalities, both of them refer themselves to the past. Laura finds herself "threatening to disintegrate into the voices of the past". The stray, half-forgotten, silhouetted moments of past establish a new meaning of their essential existence. Finally Laura's invitation to see the garden (Chapter 1) foreshadows the garden incident when they come to be co-sharers in the participation of mutual love (Chapter 4). The garden episode in its turn transcends the limited unit of time to move forward to a vision of the future. Laura and Voss are "faced with a great gap to fill, of space, and time". They come to discover that "future is will". The consciousness of future again and again torments them because of its uncertainty and mystery. Laura comes to be saddled with the pressure of an internal indecision: "The future? Laura Trevelyan could not bear to think of it, even though the present, through which the riding party moved, was still to some extent on unpleasant dream." The entire novel seeks to grasp the phases of past and future that finally conduce to an epistemological understanding of life and existence. This explains the pithy conversation between Mr. Ludlow and Laura. When Ludlow asks: "When does the future become present?" Laura curtly responds: "Now". Ludlow is extremely puzzled and Laura

explains: "Every moment that we live and breathe, and love, and suffer and die". Ludlow tries to concretise it with reference to Voss's death. But Laura goes beyond the limited frontier and strongly affirms a linear prospective ideal of life: "Voss did not die. He is there still, it is said, in the country, and always will be".

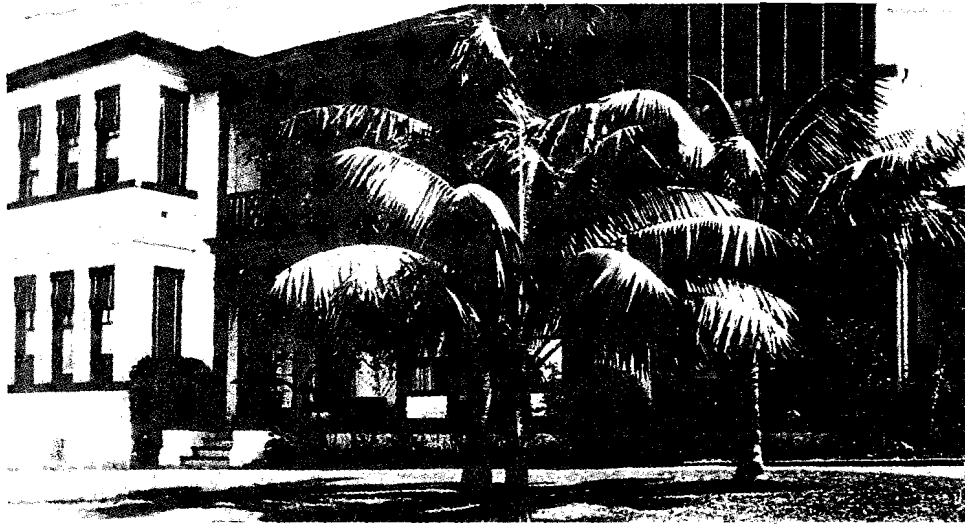
### 5.3.2 Dreams and Visions

The recurrence of dreams and visions shall be analysed in this section. There is also a co-extensive pattern of dreams, visions, hallucination and even primitive cults that unravel a complex design of thought. In fact the pattern of realism is interrupted by moments of extra-realistic visualisation. Palfreyman's precise reaction to the sailor's inexplicable story of guilt and romance perhaps sums up the entire idea: "You wished to live what you dreamed" (Chapter 5). But dreams often take the shape of visions and hallucination. When Osprey sets sail, Laura is absorbed in a persistent pattern of dream and sees the vision of the "whole rows of sailors' blackened teeth gaping from a gunnel" (Chapter 5). Again during the mystical experience in the cave, the image of the snake ritual comes to the forefront. The black fellow therefore refers to the King Snake that is the symbol of the father figure: "Father, my Father, all black feller" (Chapter 10). It is the Snake King that visits Le Mesurier in his dream. He finds himself wrestling with the "great snake, his king, the divine powers of which were not disguised by the earth colours of its scales" (Chapter 10). The ominous vision of the snake is concretised towards the end of the novel when Voss stoically waits for the final moment of death. Jackie enacts the story of the Great Snake and Voss anticipates the gradual progress towards death (Chapter 13).

This has been again curiously mixed up, through an inexplicable suggestion, with Laura's mysterious fever. There is a sporadic assemblage of cult-tokens like dew-gathering, the snake symbols, the appearance of a comet and the "odious pears" which foreshadow a seminal crisis. However, the crisis of Voss through a division in the party and his approaching death in the hands of Jackie is paralleled by Laura's crisis explicit through her undiagnosed mysterious fever. This finally reaches a level of mystical experience when Laura in a sort of delirious dream promises to Voss: "I shall not fail you" (Chapter 13). This comes to be alternately repeated in Voss's vision of Laura and it is further mystified when he visualises Laura's sickness, her strangeness and beauty: "Then he looked at her, and saw that they had cut off her hair, and below the surprising stubble that remained, they had pared the flesh from her face. She was now quite naked and beautiful" (Chapter 13).

### 5.3.3 Biography And Fiction: Some Comments

Often, there is a merging of lines where fact and fiction are concerned. Some critics have tried to discern traces of Patrick White's life in *Voss*. On the surface of it, it appears that Voss is the explorer trying to discover the mysterious interiors of the heart of Australia. But it could just as easily be looked at as a philosophical search for the infinite. To that extent, *Voss* seems to represent Patrick White's frame of mind. In Voss (the person/ character) we may also locate his maker who has always attempted to explore the mysterious zones of human existence. David Marr (White's biographer) has tried to establish biographical interconnections between Voss (the character) and Patrick White (the writer). Thus he suggests that Laura Trevelyan and her cousin Belle Bonner are modeled largely on White's "memories of the Ebbsworth children". The Ebbsworth family were linked with the White family through marital relations. Of the three Ebbsworth daughters: Mary, Elaine and Isabelle – Mary and Isabelle have been merged to create the character of Belle Bonner. Patrick White was deeply impressed by the deep and sensitive mind of Isabelle that he based Laura Trevelyan's character on her. David Marr writes: "From their older sister Isabelle, the boy sensed a measure of intuitive sympathy. This became the core of Laura Trevelyan's character. Isabelle was years older than the twins (Mary and Elaine), intense, and with a face of great interest," (David Marr, pp. 314-315).



White's childhood home at Lulworth, the source of all his Harbour houses with buffalo lawns, palms and wild gardens

Moreover, Mr Bonner's homestead is largely reminiscent of White's childhood home at Lulworth. Marr comments: "As he was writing *Voss*, White drew deeply for the first time from the history of his own family. Mr Bonner, patron of the expedition, lives in a house with Lulworth's dark gardens overlooking a rushy marsh on the edge of a Harbour. There is a bunya bunya on the drive. The house is a wilderness of mahogany and Bonner's study (was) like Dick's room at the end of the verandah..." (David Marr, p.315). Again the landscape of Voss's journey from the Hunter to Rhine Towers largely resembles Belltrees in its placid, innocent days.



Memories of Belltrees are strong in *Voss*

In the early days of settlement of the Whites in Australia, James White (the brother of Patrick White's grandfather Frank, at the age of twenty), got the land of Belltrees on lease from an ex-democrat called William Charles Wentworth in 1848. Thus the backdrop of Belltrees is detectable throughout the novel. Moreover in the novel, we find that when Voss reaches Jildra, the description of the topography seems to be based on Patrick White's memories of Brenda. It was, as David Marr points out, "the station over the Queensland border to which he had driven with his uncle, where they woke at dawn to the sound of the birds and black servants padding about in bare feet." It has been further suggested that Patrick White was immensely impressed and influenced by the exhibition of the outback paintings of Sidney Nolan in March 1949

and March 1950. These paintings became useful in creating an imaginative experience for the author, especially in his projection of the landscape of the desert. David Marr writes, "years after these exhibitions, he told the painter how he felt they had both been exploring the same territory, and expressed what they found in the same way. So he asked Nolan to do the jacket for *Voss*," (David Marr, p. 316).



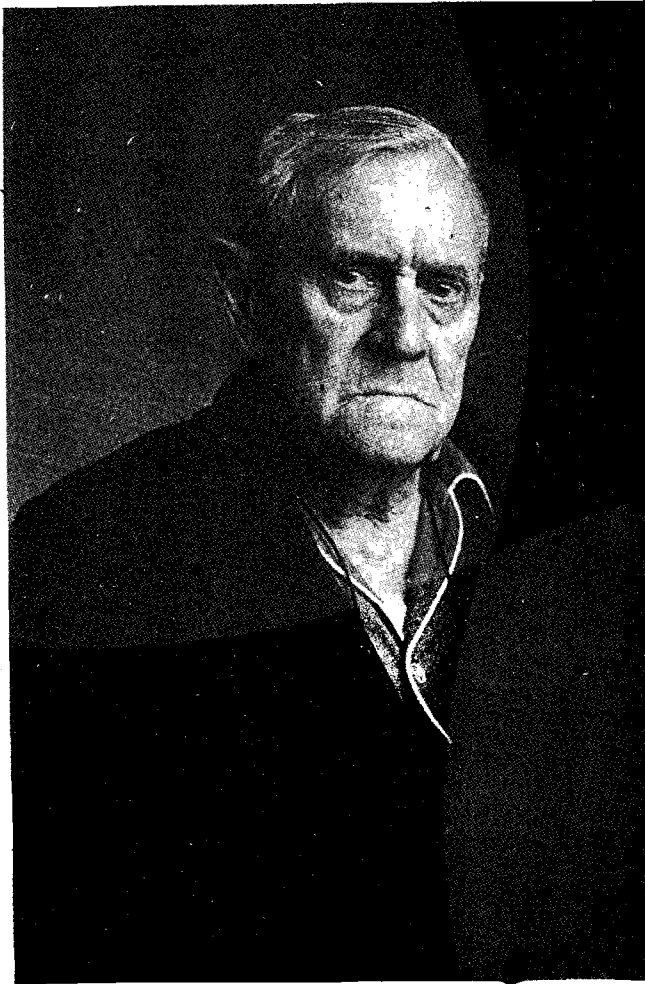
The valley at Belltrees looking east past the chapel to Mount Woolson

#### 5.4 LET US SUM UP

White's novel, thus deconstructed, should however lead up to a significant conclusion. Deconstruction expands, through a presentation of a large number of un-coded variables, the perception of knowledge. This central force is also at work through the hermeneutics of signifieds. Thus Voss is sometimes an ordinary man, sometimes a foreigner, sometimes a leader, and sometimes a god. Laura is also a woman, an intellectualised idea, even a dream. These variables are posited in terms of a number of relationships. The journey that Voss undertakes and the inner development of Laura finally yield a process of gradual transition from being to becoming. In the garden episode (Chapter 4), Laura simply looks upon herself and Voss as floundering "into each other's private beings". But this shades off into an acceptance of life as a continuum that grows, develops and finally embraces the finality of life. Thus during the cave experience, Voss states: "The mystery of life is not solved by success, which is an end in itself, but in failure, in perpetual struggle, in becoming" (Chapter 10). It is this process of becoming that turns Voss's journey into a quest, into a myth, and makes him a part of legends and history. Thus Colonel Hebden says: "Mr Voss is already history" (Chapter 14). This makes Voss an idea, enwrapped in an inscrutable mystery. The people are all curious and keen to find out the concrete reality about Voss's end. Thus Dugald and Boyle question the black fellow in an effort to know the truth. The Colonel also continues his search for the truth. Finally Judd presents the bare truth of his death.

But it does not remain confined merely to an area of information; rather it becomes a part of the cognitive pattern of knowledge. Earlier in the novel, Voss had already underlined this principle of knowledge in his own mystical way: "Perhaps true knowledge only comes of death by torture in the country of the mind". Laura comes to visualise the ultimate meaning of an abstraction, of a man turning into an idea. She therefore says: "Voss did not die. He is there still, it is said, in the country, and always will be. His legend will be written down, eventually by those who have been troubled by it" (Chapter 16). This rightly affirms the development from being to becoming.

We have come to the end of our block. We hope we have been successful in our attempt to trace the development of the modern Australian novel, analyse the novel and place Patrick White within the socio-cultural milieu of his times.



White, back in hospital in 1985 facing an uncertain future

---

## **5.5 GLOSSARY**

---

- Canon:** General standard or principle by which a work of art is judged.
- Deconstruction:** It is the most popular critical term in the postmodernist school of thought. It rejects the fixed code of meaning and accepts flexibility of interpretations. Derrida is the chief exponent of this school of criticism.
- Derrida:** Jacques Derrida is a French philosopher who read a paper entitled "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in 1966 at an international colloquium at John Hopkins University in Baltimore. He attacked the pretensions of the structuralists and set in motion the deconstruction movement.
- Paul de Man:** Paul de Mann was a Belgian who migrated to the United States of America and studied



at Harvard University. He became Professor of Comparative Literature at Yale University in 1971. He was instrumental in propagating the philosophy of Derrida.

**Subversion:**

It is a process of destroying the established beliefs and opinions. This critical principle is largely used in the postmodernist analysis of literature.

---

## 5.6 QUESTIONS

---

1. How would you consider the different levels of meaning in Patrick White's *Voss*?
2. How does Patrick White project the movements of time in *Voss*?
3. How does Patrick White present the interweaving of dream and visions in his *Voss*? Discuss.

---

## 5.7 SUGGESTED READING

---

1. Adrian Mitchell, (1981) (ed) Leonie Kramer: "The Oxford History of Australian Literature", (OUP: Melbourne).
2. Bruce Bennett & Jennifer Strauss, (1998) (eds): "The Oxford Literary History of Australia", (Oxford University Press):
3. Cynthia Van Driecen, (1978): "Patrick White and the Unprofessed Factor" – *A Critical Symposium*, (Adelaide), Eds. R. Shepherd & K. Singh.
4. David Marr, (1991): "Patrick White, A Life", (Victoria: Random Century).
5. R.F. Brissenden, (1969): "Writers and Their Work" 190, Longman.
6. Veronica Brady, (1981): "Patrick White and the Difficult God" in a *Crucible of Prophets*, (Sydney).
7. V. Chatterjee (1990): "Journal of Australian Literature, Vol. 1, no.1, June".
8. William Walsh, (1977): "Patrick White's Fiction," (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin).