

Inaugural AUHE Prize for Literary Scholarship, 2017

Speech from chair of the judging panel, Associate Professor Guy Davidson,
1 December 2017, University of Adelaide.

The panel received 18 nominations, including sole- and dual-authored books, edited collections, and a born-digital work. The standard of nominations was uniformly high and the panel found it difficult to select a winner, particularly when it came down to the last two on the shortlist.

For that reason we've elected to give the runner-up special commendation.

It gives me great pleasure to announce that that book is Tony Hughes-d'Aeth's *Like Nothing on this Earth: A Literary History of the Wheatbelt* published by UWA Press. This wonderful book treats creative writers as witnesses to what Hughes-d'Aeth calls an event – the creation of the WA wheatbelt and the destruction of the native lifeworld that enabled that creation. Hughes-d'Aeth provides what he calls a literary history of the wheatbelt, moving more or less chronologically through a selection of authors who lived in or had other strong connections to the belt, including Albert Facey, James Pollard, Dorothy Hewett, Jack Davis, and John Kinsella. Addressing literature as a documentary record of what Hughes-d'Aeth calls “interior apprehension” of the wheatbelt, the book provides a vital addition to existing discussions of this ecological event in other disciplines such as social history, agriculture, economics and ecology, while simultaneously providing sensitive discussion of the textual and generic specificities of the works under consideration. In lucid prose, Hughes-d'Aeth constructs a salutary argument about the particular and general ways literature is affected by and engages with the environment. His book makes a major contribution to Australian literary studies as well as providing important interventions in the study of literary representations of region, and the environmental humanities.

It gives me enormous pleasure to announce that the winner of the inaugural AUHE prize for literary scholarship is Elizabeth McMahon for her book *Islands, Identity and the Literary Imagination*, published by Anthem Press. This magisterial study develops a searching, multifaceted, yet exemplarily cohesive argument about the place of islands in the modern imaginary. Situated at the intersection of literary studies and the interdisciplinary field of island studies, McMahon's book is strikingly ambitious and richly informed, drawing on and developing a wide array of theoretical perspectives and ranging with consummate ease over hundreds of years of literature—from Homer's *Odyssey* to Shakespeare's *The Tempest* to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* to contemporary novels by Dionne Brand and Terri Janke – and I'm only naming a few of the many texts surveyed, and only hinting at the

surprising and galvanizing connections McMahan draws between them.

Beginning with an acute analysis of John Donne's axiom "No Man is an Island" in the contexts of its early modern and late modern utterances, McMahan argues that the terms man and island come to mirror each other, providing an anthropomorphic map of the colonized and globalized world, and consolidating the sense of the modern subject of the modern era as alienated individual. Using this contention to frame subsequent sections of the book, McMahan then moves to a pathbreaking study of the literary and cultural interconnections between the Caribbean and Australia—what Paul Sharrad calls the first and last of the new worlds. This discussion is supplemented by an appendix documenting the interactions between the colonies of Australia and the Caribbean, which is bound to provide an invaluable resource for researchers in a range of fields. In the last section of the book, McMahan first turns her attention to shipwrecks and castaways, developing an incisive account of the rhetorical and ideological dimensions of literary representations of these "accidents of empire," as she calls them. In the final chapter, McMahan considers the island as utopia and dystopia, mapping tensions and connections between (inter alia) Thomas More, Tasmanian miniature theme parks, and contemporary Australian indigenous literature. Anchored by consideration of Australia, the paradoxical island continent, but always looking outwards to globalized contexts, *Identity and the Literary Imagination* adds immeasurable value to both Australian literary studies and to studies of world literature. It is a bold and stunning work of scholarship, and we congratulate Elizabeth on her achievement.